University of Alberta

Teaching Courage: A Commentary On Plato's *Laches*

by

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"*Many are humans, few are men*" – Herodotus

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Introduction

The present inquiry has a single unifying aim: to seek the truth about an aspect of human reality, with Plato as our guide. The choice of Plato may seem born out of an antiquarian reverence for the past, but nothing could be further from the truth. For the greatest argument in favor of a turn to Plato is not his considerable standing in our tradition, but rather his being a most instructive guide for the here and now, for a world and times in need of a perspective on political life that radically challenges regnant views.

Plato's foreignness to our own times is germane to the issue at hand, as the present inquiry focuses upon Plato's dramatic examination of the untimely virtue *andreia*—courage or manliness. The unfamiliarity of the *Laches* and the remoteness of its governing theme may be seen in the characters chosen for the drama: two aristocratic patriarchs who desire military fame for their sons; two politically prominent generals who are also patriarchs; and a lone soldier-philosopher. Despite the popularity of war dramas, Lysimachus and Melesias, the two aristocrats, Nicias and Laches, the two generals, and even Socrates, the soldier-philosopher, would not be characters in a modern drama, let alone compose its entire cast. For today, fame is no longer attained primarily through activity in the martial realm; war is no longer considered the dominant concern of politics; and the political realm is no longer considered exclusively masculine. Suffice it to say, the dominant idea of courage today is dissonant with its ancient relative, not the least of reasons being the ancient emphasis on the manliness of courage.

Does not our distance from the subject matter preclude a genuine and resolute engagement with the *Laches*? There are, in fact, few better reasons for a turn to the *Laches*. The acknowledgement that other people—serious people—disagree with one's own opinions leads to taking one's own opinions seriously, as a consequence of having examined and perhaps altered them in light of plausible alternatives. Moreover, if the result is neither to affirm or reject them, we may at least better appreciate why the permanent questions remain questions. A reflective, honest appraisal of the *Laches*, as with any Platonic dialogue, is perhaps the best proof of such assertions. The present commentary is put forward as a private confession that I believe Plato succeeds in his task.

It might prove useful to offer a sketch of the interpretive principles adhered to in the subsequent commentary. There is, of course, a level of artificiality in such an approach, as the standard for judging any such principle is its usefulness in explicating the object of its interpretation, an assessment of which cannot be made at the beginning of one's analysis. Needless to say, this renders such principles provisional; the reader may decide at the conclusion of the commentary whether those employed herein have been successful in explicating the *Laches*.

Central to the adopted reading principles is a basic acceptance of the esoteric-exoteric distinction. The pertinence of this distinction rests on the premise that Plato, in crafting the Platonic dialogue, overcomes the criticisms against writing leveled by the Platonic Socrates. This is primarily achieved by consciously creating a multi-layered text, so as to say different things to different readers. Leo

Strauss provides a succinct account of this purpose, and thus is worth quoting at length:

> [Plato's Socrates] says [in the *Phaedrus*] that writing is an invention of doubtful value. He thus makes us understand why he abstained from writing speeches or books. But Plato wrote dialogues. We may assume that the Platonic dialogue is a kind of writing which is free from the essential defect of writings. Writings are essentially defective because they are equally accessible to all who can read or because they do not know to whom to talk and to whom to be silent or because they say the same things to every one. We may conclude that the Platonic dialogue says different things to different people—not accidentally, as every writing does, but that it is so contrived as to say different things to different people, or that it is radically ironical. The Platonic dialogue, if properly read, reveals itself to possess the flexibility or adaptability of oral communication. What it means to read a good writing properly is intimated by Socrates in the *Phaedrus* when he describes the character of good writing. A writing is good if it complies with "logographic necessity," with the necessity which ought to govern the writing of speeches: every part of the written speech must be necessary for the whole; the place where each part occurs is the place where it is necessary that it should occur; in a word, good writing must resemble the healthy animal which can do its proper work well. The proper work of writing is to talk to some readers and be silent to others.[1]

Consequently, the resultant hermeneutic principles require the reader to determine the "logographic necessity" of each word within a dialogue, an interpretive task that includes understanding the manifold appearances of each word, as well as the *order* of their appearance. Although, as Strauss intimates, to understand fully the Platonic Socrates' criticisms of writing and Plato's response, one must turn to the *Phaedrus*, an account of which would include the specific weaknesses of writing—its role in enfeebling one's memory, its inability to respond to questioning, its inability to tailor its speech to a given audience, and its allowing for feigned wisdom[2]—for the purposes of this commentary, the elucidation of esoteric writing is perhaps best

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[1] Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (New York: Rand McNally, 1964: reprinted Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 52-53.
[2] Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. James H. Nichols, Jr. (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1998), 274b-278d.

understood by describing the various reasons for such writing.

The most basic and readily understood reason for esoteric writing is the personal safety of the writer. One may reasonably surmise that Plato, whose protagonist Socrates was sentenced to death for corrupting the youth, was aware of this danger. On the subject of how the Platonic dialogue overcomes this problem, Strauss, again, is instructive:

> …in none of his dialogues does Plato ever say anything. Hence we cannot know from them what Plato thought. If someone quotes a passage from the dialogue in order to prove that Plato held such and such a view, he acts about as reasonably as if he were to assert that according to Shakespeare life is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.[3]

The dialogic form, then, provides an element of potential safety for the writer, insofar as it provides distance between the author and his beliefs, a distance bridgeable only by serious and time-consuming analysis.

Another reason for esoteric writing is the good of the polity. That written speech can have political effects is, of course, readily discernible in our recent history; no history of the last century can overlook the writings of Marx, for instance. Thus, deceiving those who may do others harm, or providing a false or superficial account to those who need, but do not have, a salutary account, are both clear instances of beneficial deceit; it is generally good to forestall, by deception, a madman who wishes to cause others harm, or to provide a reassuring account of death to a child.[4] In short, esoteric writing attempts to insulate its more dangerous thoughts from irresponsible or otherwise unsuitable readers.

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[3] Strauss, 50.
[4] Cf. Plato, *Republic*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1991), 382cd (Henceforth, *Republic*).

A less obvious reason, but one intimately related to the dialogue at hand, is that esoteric writing may cultivate philosophy, as defined in its primary sense—a *love* of wisdom. Therefore, the concealment of certain views has not only a political purpose, but also a philosophic one; it simulates the original philosophic experience of attempting to know reality. In other words, as one moves from the appearances of the exoteric text to the comprehensive reality of the text, continually refining one's interpretation in light of a text that remains dynamic but stationary, one must partake in the same activity as the philosopher who attempts to move from appearance to reality. Such a process has clear psychological advantages, ones that are intrinsic to philosophizing. As Leon Craig notes, the Platonic dialogue

> …does not weaken the memory, but rather strengthens it, as it does all the other powers of the rational soul. The serious study of a dialogue enhances acuity of observation, exercises one's imagination, expands curiosity, hones analytical skills, matures judgment, and cultivates one's sense of humour. But it also arouses the spirit and invokes the passions, allowing one to better understand them and their relationship to reason, in order that their energy may be harnessed and their unruliness subdued. But most important of all, arriving at an adequate interpretation of a dialogue requires one to think synoptically, synthesizing disparate evidence into a single coherent vision of the whole. And synthetic thought is the *sine qua non* of political philosophy.[5]

In addition, he later states:

> Plato's dialogues…are so many invitations to enjoy philosophy in the primary sense of the word. They are designed to entice certain kinds of readers to experience for themselves – to the extent they are naturally inclined and otherwise suited to do so – the activity of thinking, of thinking for the sheer fun of it, for the challenge of it, for the personal satisfaction of the learning and knowing that comes of it.[6]

Plato's thoughts, then, are reserved for his kin, especially those who are willing and

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[5] Leon Harold Craig, *The War Lover: A Study of Plato's Republic* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), xxvi.
[6] Ibid., xxxvi.

able to read the dialogues with the same care that Plato has exhibited in creating them. Suffice it to say, this is no small task, but it is a task inseparable from the meaning of the *Laches*.

Two Generals: Laches and Nicias

Set sometime between the years 424 and 418 B.C., and thus approximately around the time of the Peace of Nicias (421),[7] the *Laches* is a dialogue inseparable from the history of Athens. In a period of relative political prosperity for Athens, but also of feverish competition with Sparta, Socrates' primary interlocutors, the generals Nicias and Laches, are at their political peaks. Yet, looming in the future, known to Plato and the reader, while remaining unknown to the characters in the drama, are the generals' disastrous defeats, in Sicily (414) and Mantinea (418) respectively, and the final defeat of the Athenian polity. The *Laches* makes use of this history, being a drama related to both the generals' previous successes and future defeats. In a sense, the drama challenges the reader to distinguish what is tragic and what is comic concerning these two men. Since recognizing the import of the implicit historical allusions is largely a matter of understanding that which the Greek reader would readily have known regarding Laches and Nicias, a brief sketch of the two generals is required.

Although surely recognizable by the Greek reader, Laches is the less prominent of the two generals present, at least according to our historical sources. We know, from Plato, that Laches fought in the ranks alongside Socrates at Delium

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[7] Following R.G. Hoerber, "Plato's Laches", in *Classical Philology* Vol. 63, (1968): 95-96. Compare Schmid, *On Manly Courage: A Study of Plato's Laches* (USA: Southern Illinois University Press, 1992), 183, and A.E. Taylor, *Plato: The Man and is Work* (New York: The Dial Press Inc., 1927), 58, who, on different grounds, attempt a more precise date, roughly 424-423 B.C. The evidence for a more precise date, however, is far from conclusive.

(424), an incident of no small importance for understanding the dialogue (181b).[8] Thucydides briefly recounts two of Laches' campaigns, one in Sicily and later at Mantinea. From the summer of 427 to the winter of 426, Laches commanded the first Sicilian expedition, making a number of gains for Athens.[9] Despite these gains, Laches was eventually replaced by the general Pythodorus.[10] Although this stalled Athenian advances, the initial success began Athenian entanglement in Sicily, and, with Alcibiades' prompting, Athens soon pursued loftier goals. As we shall soon see, the historical dismissal of the conservative and successful Laches by a more aggressive Athenian *polis* resonates with a theme of the dialogue, the relation between the steadfast general Laches and ambitious Athens.[11]

Politically, Laches was a prominent member of the peace party, a political movement spearheaded by Nicias. Laches was thus a political ally of Nicias, accepting the one-year truce in 423, and supporting the Peace of Nicias, established in 421.[12] Laches' conservative political standpoint is thus consistent with his military record. Laches was also portrayed by Aristophanes in the *Wasps* (422), in the garb of a housedog, Labes, on trial for stealing a piece of Sicilian cheese. The speechless dog was defended by his attorney on the grounds that he "fought the wolves and suffered hardship for the good of Athens, that he should not be condemned for his inability to

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[8] References to the *Laches* refer to Plato, "Laches", in *The Roots of Political Philosophy,* trans. James H. Nichols Jr. and ed. Thomas Pangle (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1987). For ease of reading, all references to the *Laches* are contained in the commentary. Cf. also *Symposium*, trans. Seth Benardete (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 221ac (Henceforth, *Symposium*).
[9] Thucydides, *The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to the Peloponnesian War,* Richard Crawley trans. and Robert B. Strassler ed. (New York: Touchstone, 1998), 3.86.1-4, 3.90.2, 3.103.3. On the success of Laches, cf. Donald Kagan, *The Archidamian War* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1974), 189-193 (Henceforth, *Archidamian*).
[10] Thucydides, 3.115.2.
[11] Schmid, 11.
[12] *Archidamian*, 307; Schmid 11.

speak, and that he should, even if guilty, be forgiven on grounds of his lack of music education".[13] The defense of "Labes" points to the likely temperament of the conservative general, a public-spirited military man of few words. The most noteworthy episode in Laches' career was his role as general in Mantinea in 418, an elected position that again associates him with Nicias and his conservative war aims.[14] Mantinea was arguably the most significant land battle of the war, and victory surely would have led to the ascendancy of the Athenian-Argive alliance at the expense of the Spartan League. Instead, the defeat, which barely avoided being a wholesale rout, destroyed any hope of a democratic Argos seriously challenging Spartan hegemony in the Peloponnesus, and severely hindered future attempts to maintain Athens' aggressive foreign policy. Laches died on the field of Mantinea.

For a significant portion of Athenian history, Nicias occupied the highest military and political rank in Athens. His rise to prominence signaled a new era in Athenian politics, one that followed the death of the great Pericles. As Thucydides recounts, the new leaders of Athens were "more on a level with one another, and each grasping at supremacy, they ended by committing even the conduct of state affairs to the whims of the multitude".[15] The rise of Nicias and his competitors was novel in that, unlike the statesmen of the past, they were not born of aristocratic lineage. Instead, the new Athenian statesmen had risen to power on the basis of their families'

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[13]Cf. Aristophanes, *Wasps*, ed. Douglas M. MacDowell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 835-994 (Henceforth, Wasps); Schmid, 12, paraphrasing *Wasps*, 942-959.
[14] Kagan, *The Peace of Nicias and the Sicilian Expedition* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1981), 90-91 (Henceforth, *Peace of Nicias*).
[15] Thucydides, 2.65.10. For a further discussion of this change in Athenian politics, cf. *Archidamian*, 126-127.

wealth, accumulated through trade and industry. This lack of noble heritage and subsequent absence of a prominent patriarchal authority contrasts markedly with the traditional ideal of Homeric fame and the honor of one's household, creating a political tension apparent in the opening lines of the dialogue.

Nicias was also a peculiarity in the Athens of his day. He was a pious man, using his considerable means for great displays of public piety and for extensive consultation with personal diviners.[16] Nicias' public piety was fittingly accompanied by a deference to the power of Fortune, particularly in reference to his many military successes. As Plutarch describes, Nicias "did not attribute his successes in the slightest to his own skill or abilities or courage, but gave the credit to fortune and so, to avoid envy, gave up some of the glory by taking refuge in the realm of the divine".[17] Nicias was also notoriously cautious, which was noticeable in his preferred foreign policy, as exemplified by his fashioning the Peace of Nicias. Plutarch openly attributes this caution to Nicias' timidity, grounded, in part, on his fear of the people.[18] Thucydides is more reserved in his judgment of Nicias; speaking of Nicias' execution, Thucydides states that Nicias was "a man who of all the Hellenes in my time, least deserved such a fate, seeing that the whole course of his life had been regulated with strict attention to virtue".[19] This apparent disparity between the assessments of Plutarch and Thucydides points to the most telling historical event concerning Nicias, the Sicilian expedition.

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[16] Plutarch, "Nicias" in *Greek Lives*: *A selection of nine Greek Lives*, trans. Robin Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 3-6.
[17] Ibid., 6.
[18] Ibid., 2.
[19] Thucydides, 7.86.5. For an interpretation of Thucydides' eulogy in light of Thucydides' larger account, cf. *Peace of Nicias*, 369-372.

Nicias' first revealing moment concerning the expedition was the memorable role he played in the debate over Athenian involvement in Sicily. As portrayed by Thucydides, the Nicias-Alcibiades debate offered a stark contrast between the cautious Nicias and the daring Alcibiades, two men with radically divergent views on war and on Athens' proper role in war.[20] However, it was Nicias' failed rhetorical ploy, to deter the Athenians by emphasizing the magnitude of the expedition needed to be successful, which was fatal to Athens. For instead of being deterred, the Athenians readily agreed to Nicias' description of a grand campaign, and thus staked the fate of the *polis* on the Sicilian campaign.

In concert with the generals Lamachus and Alcibiades, Nicias was elected to command the expedition, forming a military triumvirate. The selection of Nicias was based on his past good fortunes in battle and on his notorious caution. The choice was intended to bring even more safety to the mission, by providing a counterbalance to the bolder generals Lamachus and Alcibiades. However, in the wake of Alcibiades' recall and Lamachus' death, Nicias soon found himself as sole commander. Nicias' cautious command ensured that the campaign would be conducted with a decisive strategic flaw: it sided neither with a daring and potentially victorious policy, in line with Alcibiades, nor with a conservative policy, such as a small campaign on the scale of Laches' earlier successes. Despite some mixed successes in the early part of the war, Nicias' faulty generalship soon hampered the Sicilian campaign. In fact, despite the massive resources, events developed so poorly that retreat became the only plausible option for the Athenians. However, rather than

[20] Cf. Thucydides, 6.8-6.14. In addition to Thucydides, the following brief sketch largely draws upon Kagan's excellent analysis. Cf. *Peace of Nicias*, 170-191.

accept the defeat, Nicias' stubbornly refused to abandon Sicily, a decision that led to the greatest disaster of the war. As Kagan notes, Nicias' failure had much to do with Nicias' fears:

> ...everything pointed to the abandonment of the campaign before more money and lives were wasted, but Nicias refused to withdraw out of fear for his reputation and safety at the hands of the Athenian assembly and law courts...he deceived himself with groundless hopes of an imminent Syracusan financial collapse that would still give the Athenians victory because he was afraid to face the Athenian assembly and explain his failure. He preferred to risk the lives of his troops and the security of Athens rather than take the chance of condemnation by his fellow citizens...When he seized on [a] lunar eclipse as a last chance to escape the inevitable, he destroyed the Athenians' final opportunity to escape.[21]

A Syracusan assembly finally put Nicias to death. The Athenians were understandably unforgiving of Nicias' failure. Pausanias tells us of a monument to the Athenian generals, displaying the engraved names of all the generals who died fighting; all but Nicias were included.[22] These aspects of Nicias' career—his political ascendancy, his piety, his reliance on diviners, his caution, his fear of the Athenian *demos*, his ignoble conduct in Sicily, his questionable reaction to the lunar eclipse, and finally his execution—would all have been common knowledge to the Greek reader.

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[21] *Peace of Nicias*, 368.

[22] Pausanias, *Description of Greece I*, trans. W.H.S. Jones (London: William Heinemann, 1918), 1.29.11-12. Pausanias argues, and we have little reason to doubt his account, that "the reason why Nicias was passed over...[is] that while Demosthenes made a truce for the others and excluded himself, attempting to commit suicide when taken prisoner, Nicias voluntarily submitted to the surrender. For this, Nicias had not his name inscribed on the slab, being condemned as a voluntary prisoner and an unworthy soldier" (I.29.11).

First Half

I. Prologue (178a-181d)

(i) Lysimachus and Melesias' request to Nicias and Laches (178a-180a)

The title, *Laches*, is the only word of the dialogue directly attributable to Plato. Although Socrates converses with two primary interlocutors, Laches and Nicias, only the former is chosen for the dialogue's title. Plato's choice points to an interpretive question of comprehensive significance: why is the dialogue as a whole characterized by the less renowned and less sophisticated of the two Athenian generals? Laches does not dominate the day's conversation; Nicias has at least an equal role in terms of both quantity and content. Nor is Laches the most persuasive speaker; Nicias seems to surpass him in both argumentative ability and rhetorical skill. Furthermore, as we understand the history of the period, Laches is not the most famous of the two generals; Nicias is politically and militarily more prominent. Finally, Laches is not necessarily the most courageous man present; according to Laches' own testimony, Socrates' courage is at least equally as worthy of wonder as his own (181b).

The display that opens the dialogue implies that the setting for the discussion is an athletic venue, perhaps a training field or gymnasium frequented exclusively by men, likely early in the day. From the beginning it is a political dialogue, for although it is a semi-private conversation, it takes place within the public sphere and

is about public concerns.[23] The expert's demonstration of fighting in armor, a display of martial and visceral quality, is likely still fresh in the interlocutors' minds, and is perhaps exciting their passions. The masculine is consequently more than merely present; it is verging on the emphatic. This excitement of the masculine spirit that opens the dialogue is paralleled by the comical exhibition of anger as the dialogue nears its conclusion.

There are seven males present: the two elderly fathers, Lysimachus and Melesias; the two generals, Nicias and Laches; the two sons of Lysimachus and Melesias, Aristeides and Thucydides; and Socrates. Socrates, the only individual without an explicit associate, prominently and intriguingly stands alone. Given the presumed setting, one is confronted with a significant question regarding the manner in which each of these men arrived. Lysimachus makes explicit that he and Melesias have invited Laches and Nicias to meet with them, without the two generals knowing what they are going to discuss. That these generals are also fathers of sons has a special pertinence to this arranged meeting; as it turns out, the four fathers form the dialogue's first alliance. Yet, it is an alliance with a background division—unlike Lysimachus and Melesias, Nicias and Laches possess the general's art and the accomplishments to match. The presence of Lysimachus' and Melesias' young sons is a direct result of their fathers' preference that they attend, for reasons to be surmised. Their attendance is a reminder that, in the first instance at least, the lives of these young men are at stake. The fathers' decision also marks two interrelated

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[23] Steward Umphrey goes so far as to describe it as *the* political dialogue in the Platonic corpus, insofar as it concerns a discussion with two politically prominent generals. Cf., "On the Theme of Plato's Laches", in *Interpretation* Vol. 6, No. 1 (Fall 1976): 2. For an excellent discussion on the political character of the *Laches*, cf. Aristide Tessitore, "Courage and Comedy in Plato's *Laches*", in *The Journal of Politics* Vol. 56, No. 1 (February 1994): 115-133.

themes in the dialogue: the proper relationship between father and son, and the proper relationship between commanding and obeying.

The presence of the boys whose education is in question has an important effect on the content and manner of the discussion. Obviously one cannot always say in front of children what one may say in front of adults. Yet, the boys are also of an age where they are self-conscious of being educated. That they may then call the proffered education into question poses an obvious pedagogic problem. As a result, the children must *agree* to obey (179d), a pedagogic problem of varying difficulty depending on the age of the children. It is notable in this regard that the boys are young enough to be under their fathers' direct supervision, who exercise an authority sufficient to ensure the boys' attendance at the display. However, this paternal authority may be insufficient to sustain the rigorous education of the boys as they grow older. Despite its pertinence, the dialogue is silent on the *precise* age of the children. One may only safely assume that the boys are likely anywhere from nearing the beginning to nearing the end of their teenage years. The boys' relationship to their fathers and to Socrates, their various designations ("boys", "lads", and "young men"), and the fact that they are beginning military training, lend credence to this rough assessment of their ages, and generally hints toward their being younger, rather than older, teenagers. The conspicuous absence of a precise indication of the boys' ages, including a precise indication of the dramatic date of the portrayed dialogue, raises the possibility that the *question* of the boys' ages has a greater significance than is readily apparent.

The reason for each character's presence is most puzzling in the case of Socrates. Lysimachus has obviously not invited him, nor is there any indication that he accompanied the two generals. Only two realistic possibilities remain regarding his presence. The most obvious is that Socrates is there "by chance", which is plausible given what Laches says of him (180c). The attendant question in this case is why Socrates desires to see such a display. The other possibility is that Socrates is with Laches, whether or not both are then also with Nicias. Nicias can reasonably be ruled out as Socrates' sole companion, for although both Nicias and Laches claim to have past relationships with Socrates (180cd, 187ec, 194d; 180c, 181ab, 188eb), only Laches will politely but insistently invite Socrates into the dialogue (180bc), an action that one may expect from a companion. In contrast, Nicias declines an opportunity to invite Socrates into the conversation (180a). In any event, it is notable that Socrates is only on the fringe of the action at the beginning of the dialogue—present, but not participating—although presumably in close enough proximity to overhear the conversation among the fathers. This stands in stark contrast to the dialogue's end, as Socrates will leave the discussion in complete command.

Neither Laches nor Nicias begins the encounter we observe in the *Laches*. Lysimachus, in what he concedes is a rather lengthy prologue (179b), initiates the dialogue by explaining to the two successful generals why he and Melesias are seeking counsel in regards to the education of their sons. The particular counsel being sought concerns a teacher of a novel martial practice, Stesilaus, who has just

displayed his art before a great crowd, with no small amount of self-promotion (183cd).

Lysimachus, before giving his reasons for holding Laches and Nicias to be good advisors on this matter, remarks generally on the problem of obtaining frank advice. Although in this opening speech Lysimachus twice makes mention of his own frankness (178a, 179b), he also points out that some ridicule attempts to obtain frank advice, and will themselves not give honest advice if they are called upon. In regard to this last claim, Lysimachus may have in mind his unnamed advisor, who originally recommended, as noble, the practice they had recently witnessed (179e). Lysimachus may also have in mind Stesilaus, who recently recommended his own practice. The obvious problem with educators and their "wares"—that one assesses the education from a position of ignorance—applies in a similar respect to advice. However, at least one thing distinguishes the educator of fighting in armor from the unnamed advisor in this case. Stesilaus teaches for money, whereas the advisor gave his advice for free. Lysimachus and Melesias turn away from Stesilaus' boasts because Stesilaus has a clear reason for appearing a better educator than he is: financial gain. The unnamed advisor, on the other hand, has sufficient credibility to persuade the fathers to consider the practice more seriously, but his recommendation is evidently not regarded as authoritative.

The fathers' awareness of this problem regarding education and advice marks an important distinction between their ignorance and their sons' ignorance, justifying their continued responsibility for the education of their sons. The elderly fathers recognize, perhaps partly as a result of their own experience, that not all pursuits are

equal, and that not all claims to good pursuits are honest claims. Consequently, they demonstrate at least a partial awareness of the seriousness of the problem, and appreciate from personal experience some of its long-term implications. This recognition of the importance of the problem also raises the possibility that the fathers, who have clearly shown care for their sons, may be more concerned with the fate of their sons' lives than are the sons themselves. In contrast to their fathers, it is likely that the sons hold the typical opinions of young men. Boys who are at the age where they may begin military training are oftentimes rebellious, and possess naïve confidence in their powers, not the least of reasons being that they are, or anticipate becoming, physically equal with their fathers. The boys present have also almost certainly not yet experienced the perplexities that confront anyone attempting to pursue an education, much less succeed in political life, and are accordingly less serious about resolving these problems—presuming they are even aware of them. In short, the fathers are aware of their own ignorance, and the implications of this ignorance, to a degree that the boys are not.

The two elderly fathers' problem of assessing potential advisors or potential educators naturally points to the question of how one can determine who are the *best* advisors or the *best* educators. That they are grappling with this difficulty is evidence of Lysimachus and Melesias' goodness. Lysimachus and Melesias' intuitive choice is Laches and Nicias, two experts in martial affairs with whom they have some past relationship. That the two generals accept the request is indicative of civic respect, if not outright friendship. In addition to this background mutual respect, Lysimachus consciously selects Laches and Nicias as advisors on the basis of three explicit

criteria: their being capable of knowing, their willingness to state their opinions simply and frankly, and their possessing children. Lysimachus is silent about what we might suspect is the most significant reason for his solicitation of Laches and Nicias. Both are renowned generals, a renown he and Melesias wish to acquire for their sons and, by implication, their own households. The larger importance of the two elderly fathers' concerns for fame subsequently becomes clear.

All three of the expressed criteria are beset by problems. First, Lysimachus' belief that the generals are capable of knowing requires that Lysimachus is himself able to judge those who possess the knowledge he is seeking. This requirement rests on an even more basic assumption that Lysimachus is able to judge what knowledge he should be seeking. Lysimachus thus unwittingly reveals a problem that is present throughout the discussion: how does one learn when one cannot distinguish those who know or what they know, or when one cannot distinguish what knowledge is worth seeking? That Lysimachus and Melesias believe they know whom they should be seeking as advisors, and thus that they know the type of advice they should be seeking, makes overcoming this difficulty considerably more problematic. Second, Lysimachus' criterion of frankness is problematic insofar as it is necessarily based on trust, namely the trust that one has in one's advisor that they are, in fact, being frank. As we soon see, however, at least one of the generals seems unworthy of this trust. Finally, the appeal to the shared experience of rearing children assumes that both Laches and Nicias have the same experience as the two older fathers. However, Lysimachus' desire for fame is in large part motivated by his painful experience of the absence of renown, a point in obvious contrast with the two generals' enjoyment

of renown. Another crucial difference is soon established: neither Laches nor Nicias need to be concerned, in educating their sons, that their fathers exceeded them in political greatness. As a result, Laches' and Nicias' different dispositions to renown, or to fathers and sons, potentially affect their ability to give advice to Lysimachus and Melesias.

Fundamental to this opening is the prominence of fathers educating sons. Not only does Lysimachus make mention of the sons present, and of the two generals' sons, he also attributes his and Melesias' obscurity to their own fathers. Lysimachus, speaking on behalf of himself and Melesias, claims that their failure to perform "noble deeds"—and their consequent lack of fame—is a result of their own illustrious fathers' neglect of their sons.[24] This perceived role of fatherly education emphasizes the political importance of the household, and the vital role a father can play in a son's education. Nevertheless, Lysimachus' charge against his father betrays his confused opinions about education. Lysimachus assumes that he possesses the requisite nature for political greatness, by virtue of his noble lineage, and further assumes that only a faulty education may explain his lack of fame in reference to his father's renown. Lysimachus disregards the role of chance in two significant ways. First of all, Lysimachus does not entertain the possibility that his nature is unlike the nature of his renowned father. Instead, he assumes a necessary concurrence of great-natured fathers producing great-natured sons, and thus ignores the chance possibility of sons who are unlike their fathers in nature, for better or worse. Second, Lysimachus assumes that one's actual qualities and one's political recognition are

[24] For an alternative account of the cause of Lysimachus' and Melesias' obscurity, see Socrates' own comments in the "Meno" in *Plato II: Laches, Protagoras, Meno, Euthydemus*, trans. W.R.M. Lamb and ed. G.P. Goold (London: Harvard University Press, 1924), 94ab.

necessarily commensurate; he therefore neglects the large role chance may play in the acquisition of fame. As is seen with the historical Nicias, however, this is hardly a safe assumption.

Lysimachus concludes by explicitly stating his request for advice. In the process, he makes apparent that the renowned generals have gained his and Melesias' trust on matters that go beyond the art in question. The request is not only concerning the subject of fighting in armor, but any study the generals wish to recommend. Lysimachus is clear that he is interested in any study that will help the boys "become as good as possible" (179d). That it has required such a lengthy speech to arrive at this point is a reminder of the difficulty that Lysimachus faces in making such a request, one that places him in a subservient position.

(ii) Laches and Lysimachus' request to Socrates (180b-181d)

It is Nicias who seems more enthusiastic to enter the discussion, at least on the terms proposed by Lysimachus. He quickly accedes to Lysimachus' solicitation, and further presumes Laches does as well. Laches ratifies Nicias' claim, but also offers a more substantial reply. Laches' entry into the dialogue is divided into two major parts. The first is a response to Lysimachus' thoughts on public men. Laches, unlike Nicias, observes that Lysimachus' indictment against public men is a fine one. Their "heedless and neglectful disposition" toward private affairs is a legitimate criticism against men who are strictly oriented toward the city (180b). Laches frankly admits, in particular, that their children tend to be short-changed. Of note here is that Laches

includes himself among these men, and is still willing to admit he is deserving of this criticism. Laches is clear: he is preoccupied with public affairs, even though this results in the neglect of his private affairs. Laches' willingness to accept responsibility for this blame is, among other things, evidence of his frankness. In contrast, Nicias is silent on this concern, either because he took care of private affairs, or because he is unwilling to admit to the tension between private life and public life.

The second major part of Laches' entry is some unsolicited advice to Lysimachus. He expresses wonder at Lysimachus and Melesias not summoning Socrates to counsel, and, recalling the unnamed advisor's suggestion of Stesilaus, counsels seeking him out. It is notable that the man who will eventually be recognized by the others as the best possible educator for the young men, and who will point to noble studies or practices not even considered by the elderly fathers, is initially passed over altogether. In defending his recommendation of Socrates, Laches' public spiritedness again comes to the fore; the first reason he gives is that Socrates is of Lysimachus' *deme*. Laches sees one's interest as related to the interests of one's political comrades, and therefore raises the issue of political friendship as a potential ground for advice. Laches' reference to Lysimachus and Socrates' *deme* is another reminder of the familial and political ties that resonate throughout the dialogue.

However, the common interest and good will implicit in political friendship, is at best a necessary condition for good advice, but hardly a sufficient one. More to the point, Laches also reports that Socrates is "always spending his time wherever there is any noble study or practice of the sort [Lysimachus and Melesias] are seeking for the'

youths" (180c). Socrates should be called upon as an advisor, since his constant association with noble studies or practices has presumably made him knowledgeable about these studies or practices. Consequently, it is Laches who is the first of the two generals to begin broadening the question from fighting in armor to other noble pursuits of young men, responding to Lysimachus' invitation to do so (180a).

The prominence of the noble in Lysimachus' request and Laches' reply begins a topic of major significance for the dialogue. The phenomenon of seeing certain deeds as noble, and the resulting problem of assessing deeds in terms of their actual nobility, are fundamental to political life. The importance of the noble is underlined by the drama of the dialogue; the dialogue began with a display, and is in part attempting to determine whether or not this display was a noble one, and whether or not it will educate the boys to perform noble deeds. Moreover, the first mention of the noble is in reference to the noble deeds of Lysimachus' and Melesias' fathers, deeds that presumably won the two men their fame (179c). Laches now implicitly recalls another sight that is intertwined with the noble, one he has seen himself or has been told of by others: the image of Socrates spending his time wherever there are noble studies or practices of the sort Lysimachus is seeking. As a result, the dialogue now turns to discussing the figure of Socrates, and his qualifications as a third advisor. The deeper significance of Socrates' peculiar association with the noble is not yet apparent.

Nicias now verifies, with enthusiasm, that Socrates indeed has devoted care to the noble studies of youths. Nicias' reply is revealing in regard to what he takes to be a noble study of youth, namely one more concerned with music and theoretical

concerns. For it turns out that Nicias sought a recommendation from Socrates previously, regarding a suitable music teacher for his own son. This musical study rather obviously contrasts with the athletic and martial study that is currently under investigation. Socrates' qualification as an advisor on athletic and military practices, as opposed to his qualification as an advisor on musical matters, has still to be established. It remains to be seen why musical and gymnastic studies are both to be recommended.

Laches' recommendation having been confirmed by Nicias, Lysimachus now asks Socrates to contribute his "good counsel", adding his own reason as to why Socrates should willingly do so: paternal friendship. Lysimachus continues to speak in patriarchal terms, referring to Socrates in a traditional manner, as the child and son of Sophroniscus (180d, 181a), and observing that Socrates' standing exalts his father. The reference to sons exalting fathers is likely meant as much for the benefit of the two sons present—who are now implicitly being called upon to exalt their own fathers—as it is for Socrates. Significantly, Lysimachus makes the first mention of justice, which is the first mention in the dialogue of a virtue: it is only *just* that Socrates be willing to give counsel to a fellow *demesman*, and all the more so in recognition of a paternal friendship between Lysimachus and Sophroniscus. Implicit in Lysimachus' use of the term justice is a notion of gratitude; Socrates, as a grateful son, must abide by the paternal friendship between the two patriarchs.

It is significant that Lysimachus turns to the boys to ask whether or not this is the Socrates they have praised in the past. On the one hand, Lysimachus may be disingenuously yet politely "confirming" that the children were speaking of *this*

Socrates when they praised a man named Socrates, thereby excusing himself for initially passing Socrates over. Indeed, the elderly Lysimachus may be suspicious of Socrates precisely because of his association with youths and because of the young men's praise. This interpretation is supported by the fact that it would be peculiar for Socrates to be present at the conversation if he barely knew Lysimachus, and by the fact that Lysimachus does not include the boys' praise when he refers to the fine praise that Socrates' receives (181b). On the other hand, if Lysimachus already knew the boys were speaking of *this* Socrates, it is not entirely clear why he would ask the boys to verify his claim. He easily could have offered a polite response without their verification. Moreover, Nicias will later have reason to claim that Lysimachus must not know Socrates and his distinctive activities, a claim that Lysimachus does not deny (187de). A second possibility, then, is that Lysimachus is being sincere and is unfamiliar with Socrates. Consequently, it may be the case that although Lysimachus' and Melesias' sons praised Socrates in the past, and were influenced by Socrates, Lysimachus did not concern himself with knowing Socrates. In any event, what is distinctive about Lysimachus' solicitation is that it reveals Lysimachus' lack of regard for the opinions of the youths. Of course, this is hardly surprising, as it is not immediately obvious that a father coveting fame for his son and his household, and accordingly wanting to educate his son in military practices, should be overly concerned about the son's respect for a particular man. Later events, however, will provide reasons for reflection on this point.

At present, it is worthwhile to note that the revealing of the boys' opinions directs one to a critical pedagogic and political problem. The fatherly education of

sons, and the political education of the young generally, always begins with youths who already have opinions about political life, and already have formed themselves in accord with these opinions. The degree to which education may affect young men is thus mitigated by the fact that one may only *reform* already educated youths, including those in attendance. In terms of fighting in armor, one must confront the possibility that the boys may be unable to benefit from the study as a result of their prior education. For instance, an undisciplined and indulgent childhood may corrupt a child to the point where he cannot submit himself to the discipline required for a serious martial or gymnastic education.

Laches' interjection is again two-fold. Laches first gives another declaration that Lysimachus not let Socrates go; Laches is forceful, proceeds on his own volition, and again emphasizes the public face of virtue. That is, he pointedly notes that Socrates exalted "not only his father, but also the fatherland" (181b). Implied in Laches' assertion is the suggestion that the greatness and purpose of fathers should be commensurate with the greatness and purpose of the fatherland. It presumes a harmony between fathers and the *polis* that will prove to be problematic.

Most importantly, Laches implicitly chooses to distinguish Socrates by his courage. Unlike Nicias, who has just pointed out Socrates' sagacity in choosing musical tutors, a discipline that is more private than public, Laches is most impressed by Socrates' proven courage. It is our first indication of courageous deeds, made in regard to that arena that so readily gives itself to examples of courage—war. To do so, Laches points to an event that reverberates throughout the entire discussion: his and Socrates' conduct during the Athenian retreat at Delium, a withdrawal so

impressive that, "if the others had been willing to be such as [Socrates], the city would have been upright and would not then have suffered such a fall" (181b). Arguably, the most distinctive and extraordinary feature of Socrates' conduct—his presence of mind in the rout—is not made explicit by Laches. In contrast to Laches' account, Alcibiades describes the same episode in the *Symposium* thus:

> Men, it was worthwhile to behold Socrates when the army retreated in flight from Delium; for I happened to be there on horseback and he was a hoplite. The soldiers were then in rout, and while he and Laches were retreating together, I came upon them by chance. And as soon as I saw them, I at once urged the two of them to take heart, and I said I would not leave them behind…First of all, *how much more sensible he was than Laches*; and secondly…walking there just as he does here in Athens, 'stalking like a pelican, his eyes darting from side to side,' quietly on the lookout for friends and foes, he made it plain to everyone even at a great distance that if one touches *this [real] man*, he will defend himself vigorously. Consequently, he went away safely, both he and his comrade; for when you behave in war as he did, then they just about do not even touch you; instead they pursue those who turn in headlong flight.[25]

That the mental basis of Socrates' remarkable courage goes unremarked by Laches is distinctive of his perspective on manly virtue.

The example of Socrates, however, also points to a problem with fame that will soon become more apparent. Although the able general, Laches, is impressed by Socrates' martial conduct, it did not give Socrates the renown that Lysimachus is seeking for his son. It is evident that Lysimachus and Laches prize two somewhat different ends. In contrast to Lysimachus' concern for fame, Laches is more impressed by Socrates having proved himself in practice; it does not seem overly to concern Laches that Socrates is not widely renowned for his military conduct. Despite this slight tension between Laches' and Lysimachus' perspectives, Laches' appeal to the fatherland, taken together with Socrates' possessing courage as proved

[25] *Symposium*, 221ac (emphasis added).

in practice, finally win over the patriarch Lysimachus. In addition to recognizing (and rejoicing in) the fineness of the praise, since it comes "from men worthy of being trusted and for such things" as are worthy of praise (181b), Lysimachus again refers to justice. He does so in the course of once more voicing his respect for a type of friendship or kinship: Socrates, having been endorsed by the two generals, can and should justly regard Lysimachus and Melesias as his "own".

Socrates' belated entry into the conversation invites immediate comparison with the lead role that has been undertaken by Lysimachus. Socrates effectively takes control of the conversation, but does so in a measured and polite manner.[26] Socrates partly defers to Lysimachus' political lead by addressing his concerns and wishes in reference to what Lysimachus proposes, and defers to Laches and Nicias on the basis of age and experience, arguing that to do so is "most just". By implication, the two sons must themselves defer to Lysimachus and Melesias on this same basis. Age and experience, and thus political wisdom or prudence, alongside justice, are the first authorities given respect by Socrates. Politically, of course, the influence and authority of age and experience, and the prudence that they may bring, can hardly be overstated. The younger men must defer to Lysimachus and Melesias, and in so doing follow the sound political principle of respecting and exalting those who most likely possess prudence. Contained in this salutary conservative principle, however, is also a limitation on political life. For reasons that are to be surmised, one cannot count on all people to distinguish between those who are truly wise and those who only appear wise. Although Socrates may be the wisest of the men present, political

[26] For a similar account concerning the nature of Socrates' entry, cf. Mark Blitz, "An Introduction to the Reading of Plato's *Laches*", in *Interpretation* Vol. 5, No. 2 (Winter 1975): 191-192.

life is governed by appearances, including the appearance of prudence or wisdom. In this sense at least, Socrates must be concerned with the appearance of wisdom as much as with the reality of wisdom.

Socrates also explicitly refers to education, specifically in terms of teaching and persuasion. Socrates, perhaps ironically, first claims that he would like to hear from Laches and Nicias so as to learn from them. If Socrates has "something else to say besides what is said by them", Socrates will teach and persuade Lysimachus and the generals (181d). It should be noted that the two generals who were so adamant about having Socrates join the conversation take this assertion seriously. Despite their respect for Socrates, it is also clear both Laches and Nicias are confident that, as two able military men, they do know something about the issue at hand. As a result, they may potentially have something to teach Socrates, or Socrates may at least concur with their assessments of the art. Nonetheless, although both Laches and Nicias may possess knowledge by virtue of their technical expertise, their opinions regarding fighting in armor soon reveal that they think they know far more than simply what they know by their art. The assumptions that the two men bring to their judgments of the display are of great significance, as is more fully revealed, by Socrates, in the second half of the dialogue. That these assumptions are examined is evidence that Socrates remains true to his word; Socrates teaches and persuades the men concerning things he knows that they only think they know.

The final part of Socrates' first speech requests of Nicias that either he or Laches speak. Although this may also suit his own inclination, Nicias is subtly maneuvered into speaking first. In keeping with his assumed deference, then,

Socrates does not actually prescribe who speaks and when, but instead provides an occasion for both to reveal their thoughts. It is also important, however, that Socrates subtly encourages Nicias to speak first. Socrates' familiarity with Laches would likely include the knowledge that Laches is a lover of victory, especially given Laches' forthcoming nature in this regard (194a). No doubt this love of victory applies to victory in argument. With an opponent having been thrust before him, Laches will be given the chance to try his hand at the contest.

II. The Two Generals on Fighting in Armor (181e-184c)

(i) Nicias' endorsement of fighting in armor (181e-182d)

Nicias offers a rhetorically effective argument for the practice of fighting in armor. In contrast to the historical Nicias, who is said to have won the loyalty of the many due to his lack of cleverness in speech and trials, the Platonic Nicias proves himself an able speaker.[27] All the more impressive is that the rhetorical display—a well-structured, seven-part argument, ascending from the good of the body to success in political life—is formed on the spot. Nicias thus displays here that he has skills akin to those taught by the sophists.

Nicias begins his analysis with a double point, that

> …it is good that [youths] not pass time elsewhere, in places where the young love to spend their time when they have leisure, but in this, from which they must necessarily be in better bodily condition—for it is not inferior to any of the gymnastic exercises, nor does it offer less toil—and at the same time this gymnastic, as well as horsemanship, most befits a free man. (181ea)

The major thrust of his first argument centers on the practice being good for the body. Since youths have leisure, like the boys here in question, it is useful for them to be occupied with beneficial and laborious activities. Nicias' opening argument is thus tailored to the political context, a luxurious Athens with a leisurely class of youth, many of whom are apt to have parents who have not distinguished themselves politically. Although the polity's aristocratic class makes leisure possible, its entrenchment ensures that many of the men who enjoy the benefits of this leisure

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[27] Plutarch, 2-3. Drawing upon Nicias' speeches in Thucydides, and possibly Plato as well, Kagan supplies a portrait of Nicias more akin to the one we confront in the *Laches*. Cf. *Peace of Nicias*, 284.

have not earned it by deeds. Nicias' call to bodily toil is thus meant to draw the youth to an active and strenuous life, rather than to a life of lazy pleasures.

Nicias' second and supporting point, that fighting in armor (along with horsemanship) is an exercise of free men, rests on an ambiguity in his first distinction. Presumably, or perhaps ideally, fighting in armor befits free men, as freedom rests on war and the warrior class, and fighting in armor cultivates the qualities necessary for a genuine warrior class. It is young men who train for war, and thus their leisure-time pursuits may be what ensure that the polity as a whole is free. However, if the question is why this particular practice is politically beneficial, irrespective of whether or not it is honored, the appeal to it being a practice befitting free men begs the question. For it assumes that the practice achieves its aim of making men good in war, thus making them the preservers and guarantors of freedom. Nicias' point thus rests on an ambiguity between what befits well-born men of the leisurely class, which, for example, may include some musical training, and what practices cultivate free and noble men, through being genuinely useful in war. In expressing the belief that exercising in war-related activities is the suitable employment of free men, Nicias also glances toward the continual competition between Athens and Sparta, stating that "only they who exercise themselves in the implements relating to war exercise themselves in that contest in which we are competitors and in those things for which the contest lies before us" (182a). As we shall see, this abstract glance towards the conflict gripping Athens at the time is played upon by Laches.

Whether the competition ends in personal victory, or in personal honor, Nicias implies that this competition is won on the level of the individual rather than on the

level of the political association. In short, Nicias, like most of us, feels compelled to justify the good of the exercise on grounds other than the purely public or political good it entails. Indeed, the individual may be the ultimate ground on which a practice must be justified. Yet, public spirited men such as Laches do point to the possibility that one may place the goodness of the polity higher than, or prior to, the goodness of the individual.

Nicias next contends that the skill in question is of some benefit in actual combat. Nicias first points out that the practice will help one while in the ranks. This point is crucial, considering that the ultimate test for a hoplite army comes when it clashes with another organized hoplite army. As a general rule, the first to be reduced to disorder and chaos loses the battle. Thus if one is making a public spirited defense of military practices, one might suppose that the first consideration is whether the practice helps preserve the order of the ranks. Yet, despite its crucial importance, Nicias never explains how this individual art of fighting in armor improves one's ability to fight in the ranks alongside others who are not possess of this special expertise. What is potentially its greatest virtue Nicias only mentions in passing.

Instead, Nicias' central argument emphasizes that the "greatest benefit" of fighting in armor is its usefulness when the ranks are broken, when "one must, one on one, either pursue to attack someone who is defending himself or defend oneself even in flight from another who is attacking" (182ab). Consequently, the greatest benefit reaped from this expertise is in individual combat, whether on defense, protecting one's personal safety, or on offense, perhaps winning personal glory. Nicias' appraisal of the practice thus centers on what is most important to Lysimachus and

Melesias, the Homeric ideal of fame for the individual soldier and for the household this soldier represents. Indeed, the portrait of fighting in armor as a means of winning *personal* glory, while the ranks are broken and the army is in disarray, presents a picture of war that is more than a little romantic. One wonders whether the "musical" Nicias is harkening back to the poetic accounts of heroes, who plunge into hand-to-hand combat for the sake of glory alone, or whether Nicias is playing on Lysimachus' yearning for such glory. In any case, Nicias suggests that the best man is not simply in the winning ranks, but is also able to seize personal honor and victory.

Nicias' fifth argument points explicitly to the acquisition of honor. Nicias maintains that fighting in armor leads men on to other noble studies in which even higher honor is to be won; first as a skilled tactician, then as a strategist. Although this argument, in itself, could be justified in terms of a higher aim than honor, such as the salvation of one's polity, Nicias' emphasis suggests he is more concerned with how it will lead one to a more honorable status. Nicias accordingly singles out the honor that is attained when one grasps the art of military tactics. Like Lysimachus, Nicias is silent on the role fortune may play in the acquisition of honor. In addition, Nicias' argument, whether he recognizes it or not, points to a possible conflict in an honor lover's soul. If one's highest concern is honor, one naturally favors practices that are honored. Yet it may be the case that not all practices that lead to higher positions of honor are, in fact, honorable in themselves. For instance, training in fighting in armor may not be honored in itself, but its successful practice may lead to honor in battle. Thus one may pursue fighting in armor for the honor that will ultimately be attained. However, this is problematic when one considers that this

education presumes that honor-loving boys, or whomever undergoes the education, would be willing to endure current toil for later honor, and thus are able to act "rationally" in this respect (cf. 197ab). On the other hand, if the elderly fathers are attempting to educate sons who do not greatly desire honor, they are faced with a major pedagogic challenge; they cannot use honor as the initial attraction to the study, as the sons will not share the same desire to reach their fathers' goal.

Nicias' final two arguments continue the emphasis on the appearance of virtue, rather than virtue itself. The particular virtue in question is courage, its first explicit mention in the dialogue. Nicias' assertion, that it would allow one to appear more courageous than oneself, implies that it is not courage that one is seeking, but rather the victory or honor that one may acquire as a result of the appearance of more courage than one actually possesses. This appearance of courage makes one more terrible to the enemy, making one more likely to win victory in battle, and thus making one more likely to win honor. Yet, if one desires courage for "its own sake", rather than for the honor it may bring, one should be embarrassed that one's actions are not arising out of true courage, or that one is not as genuinely courageous as one appears. Nicias' addition of grace provides an interesting example for comparison. Nicias claims that one will appear more graceful when one needs to appear more graceful. This grace invokes more terror in one's enemies through graceful warfare, again making one more likely to gain victory and honor. Certainly, there is something to Nicias' point. Military training often does create a more graceful warrior, made more beautiful and stronger through their gymnastic training. Unlike courage, however, Nicias does not have to argue that one is more graceful *than*

oneself. Grace is quality such that the reality of it is necessarily apparent. It is not questionable, in a way the *apparently* courageous man may be questionable, whether or not one can appear graceful without being graceful. Nicias' reliance on an inflated appearance of courage rather than courage itself makes it doubtful whether he sees the need for the reality of courage, rather than simply the appearance of courage.

What is most remarkable about the entirety of Nicias' argument is that it is an exclusively abstract theoretical account, absent of any instances of men made good by the art, and absent of any evidence that the art has been proven in practice.[28] Nicias' abstract portrait is characteristic of the cosmopolitan man, successful in private and in public, in war and in public life. The portrait echoes Nicias himself. Nicias' confidence in his argument is emphasized as he turns the discussion over to Laches, to "hear anything besides these things…with pleasure" (182d; by contrast, cf. 188a).

(ii) Laches' assault on fighting in armor (182e-184c)

Laches now vigorously attacks the practice, advancing considerations that are absent from Nicias' account. He presents a four-point argument, and though he begins and ends with generalities, the core of his case is centered on concrete empirical evidence. Laches' opens with a tripartite division of studies: serious studies, non-serious studies, and studies that are studies in appearance only. Laches, acknowledging that "it seems good to know all things" (182e), implicitly treats learning as good in itself. However, Laches in effect uses this as a qualification on

[28] For an elaboration of this aspect of Nicias' speeches, cf. Darrell Dobbs, "For Lack of Wisdom: Courage and Inquiry in Plato's *Laches*", in *The Journal of Politics* Vol. 48 (1986): 831-833; cf. also Blitz, 193-194.

studies. Since a study, insofar as it is one, must be good in some sense, one must establish that the particular study is actually good; and perhaps beyond that, why it is a *better* study than others. Man is finite, and only has time for the best of activities. For Laches, the standard is *seriousness*, a trait he associates with manliness, and a trait that constantly accompanies his public spiritedness—men are properly serious, hence *responsible*. Laches' distinction hinges on what will become more prominent in the second half of the dialogue, a distinction between knowledge and wisdom.

Laches draws an essential relationship between study (or "learnables"; *mathēmata*) and practice (or pursuit; *epitēdeumata*). In making his argument, Nicias had relied throughout on the assumption that fighting in armor is a study. Nicias' only mention of practice in the dialogue is in reference to studies and practices that potentially result from the study of fighting in armor (182c). Consequently, Nicias did not draw a causal link between the learning of an art and the successful application of that art. As previously noted, Nicias instead has emphasized a conception of knowledge that is theoretical and abstract, and to that extent may be divorced from the need to prove in practice what one knows. By contrast, for Laches, knowledge that is not effective in practice is empty.

For that reason, Laches proceeds to advance arguments based on empirical reality, appealing directly to current practice.[29] As evidence of his practicality, Laches cites the Lacedaemonians, "for whom nothing else in life is a care but to seek and practice that, by the learning and practicing of which they may gain the advantage over others in war" (182ea). Since the war loving Lacedaemonians do not practice fighting in armor, Laches argues, we may presume it is not a good study.

[29] For a similar account, cf. Schmid, 68-69.

Yet, there is an inherent danger in Laches' form of argument, rendering it inconclusive. It is a problem with any analysis that relies exclusively on the empirical world, and on what has been proven by practice. The way things are may not be the best way things could be; if one stops at this standard, the way things are, one cannot hope to improve on it by holding out a higher standard, or by adopting novel practices that are better than the proven practices. Sparta may be the best at war among the Greeks, but adopting novel practices may make them even more formidable. That such practices may be overlooked, even by those dedicated to war such as the Spartans, is readily seen in relation to the historical episode that in effect destroyed Spartan hegemony, the battle of Leuctra in 371. The battle is significant in the present case, as the Thebans defeated the Spartans partly because of their innovative and largely untried military formation. As Strassler describes, "when the mass of Theban hoplites, arrayed in an extraordinary formation fifty-ranks deep, broke through their opposing phalanx at Leuctra, the Spartan's army's reputation for military invincibility was forever shattered".[30] An additional problem with Laches' position is that the standard of the way things are often tends to have a degenerative effect on the way things are. In order to counteract this tendency, current practice must rest on ideals that are seldom fully realized, and may even be unattainable altogether. Although this problem in Laches' argument has broader implications, it is also readily applicable to the case at hand. Current military practices rest on training regimens that do more than attempt to cultivate the average or even high quality

[30] Robert B. Strassler, in "Epilogue" in *The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to the Peloponnesian* War, trans. Richard Crawley and ed. Robert B. Strassler (New York: Touchstone, 1998), 553.

soldier. Rather, one sets forth an ideal for which the soldier strives, such as the beautified portrait of Achilles.

As soon as one recognizes this aspect of education, the problem changes from the way things are to the way things could be in the future. In terms of assessing military educators, especially ones novel to the regime, one must be especially concerned with the ideal that these educators are setting forth. From Nicias' perspective, part of the attraction of fighting in armor is it provides an opportunity to be a well-rounded soldier. One is able to fight both in the ranks and when the ranks are broken, not only to defeat the enemy, but also to appear more courageous and graceful in the process. In contrast, Laches' appeal is to the current practice of the Lacedaemonians. Laches makes clear what he finds ideal about the Lacedaemonians, and why he considers them a standard. To repeat: "nothing else in life is a care but to seek and practice that, by the learning and practicing of which they may gain the advantage over others in war" (182ea). They are consequently also "the most serious of the Greeks about such things" (183a). Where Nicias emphasized the manifest ways the study of fighting in armor helps the individual soldier, in private and public life, Laches fastens strictly to the advantage of the army and thus victory in war. Laches' portrait of the simple Lacedaemonians is thus directly contrasted with Nicias' portrait of the well-rounded Athenian soldier.

In support of his sympathy with Sparta, and thus his criticism of Athens and its approach to education, Laches posits a faulty analogy. Just as Athens honors tragedy, and thus makes the best audience for peddlers of tragedies, Sparta honors war and makes the best clientele for useful military inventions. The intent of

Laches' example is clear; since those who are best in war, and thus who are presumably the best judges of war, do not honor the practice, it cannot be a good one. The reluctance of teachers of fighting in armor to display their art in Sparta reveals that they are unwilling to submit themselves to the judgment of experts in war, and thus would be like tragedians who do not believe their tragedies are fine ones, and who for that reason would be unwilling to display their tragedies in Athens.

Although humorous and rhetorically effective,[31] Laches' analogy is flawed in that it assumes Athens accepts the practitioners of the art whereas Sparta does not simply because of their differing judgments on the skill in question. Yet, on the one hand, the presence of both teachers of novel arts and of tragedians in Athens may be an effect of Athens being an open city, hence more receptive to displays of such things. In contrast, Sparta may turn aside such men because they disdain foreigners and the novelties they bring, regardless of whether or not these novelties are better than their current practice. That is, the judgment may not be on the art itself, but on the fact that allowing these men to enter Sparta would violate Sparta's general policy. Either one promotes novelty and openness, or one promotes traditionalism and closed horizons. Athenian openness to the novel leads one to the main fault in the analogy, that being its overlooking a major difference between military practice and tragedies. Tragedies, being in part a means of entertainment, can be prized *because* they are novel. Even if one were to believe that *Oedipus Rex* is the height of tragedy, one may still wish to attend novel but inferior tragedies. Of course, this is quite unlike military

[31] On the relevance of Laches' humor and rhetorical skills, and its apparent conflict with Aristophanes' portrait, cf. Schmid, 70-71.

practices. Military practices are not sought because they are novel, but because they are useful; in fact, novelty may be a hindrance to military practices, at least insofar as the implementation of novel practices requires training.

Moving from the general to the particular case, Laches again appeals to practice. Since the men who are the alleged experts in fighting in armor never actually distinguish themselves in war, it seems clear that the skill of fighting in armor does not truly educate students for success in war. Consequently, fighting in armor is not, according to Laches, a serious study, but must instead be either a non-serious study or not a study at all. For instance, if alleged experts in a novel form of painting are unable to prove themselves in painting, gaining a reputation as fine painters, one would doubt that the novel form of painting was a fine one. As Laches admits, however, his argument is necessarily limited to cases with which he is antecedently acquainted. Thus, it is not absolutely conclusive that the practice is in principle worthless, that it could *never* be proven in practice.

Laches next provides an anecdote aimed at Nicias' earlier assertion that "this knowledge would make every man in war not a little more confident and more courageous than himself" (182c). Stesilaus, this very teacher of fighting in armor who was recently putting on a display, Laches saw "elsewhere truly putting on a finer display, albeit unwillingly" (183cd). Laches' anecdote is colorful, to say the least, and surely grabs the attention of the two fathers. Stesilaus, aiding in the attack on a transport vessel with the "wise business" of a novel "scythe spear", managed to entangle himself with the passing ship. Unable to free himself, Stesilaus was comically dragged along by the transport vessel, to the mocking applause of the

enemy. Finally, "when someone threw a stone on the deck by his feet and he let the spear go, then indeed the men on the trireme too were no longer able to hold back their laughter, seeing that scythe spear hanging from the transport vessel" (184a). If the two fathers had not already decided against fighting in armor, this anecdote surely destroys Stesilaus' credentials as a teacher for the boys. Not only does the "expert" Stesilaus not seem to offer fame in war, his art seems to offer the opposite: humiliation. Worse yet, Stesilaus is not only ridiculous to his enemies, he is also ridiculous to his comrades.

Laches' anecdote has the further benefit of revealing the misleading nature of Stesilaus' confidence and ostentation. Despite Stesilaus' lack of proven battle effectiveness, he nonetheless makes grand claims about the merits of what he teaches, and is able to give grand displays to support his claims. In the gymnasium or the training field, where Stesilaus is not subject to the desperate conditions of mortal battle, Stesilaus may be able to maintain a daunting appearance. Yet, when confronted with the exigencies of actual combat, Stesilaus is not able to prove himself effectively knowledgeable. Thus, as Laches points out, Stesilaus does not prove that his art teaches a student to conduct oneself well—which is to say courageously—in battle.

Laches agrees with Nicias that the practice of fighting in armor may encourage one to appear more courageous than one is in reality; for Laches, however, this means that one "may actually become *bolder* on account of" the practice, trusting that it provides a substantial advantage (184b). The reserved Laches' opinion of excessive boldness is clearly derogatory, and recalls the traditional opposition

between Spartan caution and Athenian daring.[32] Laches gives a second important and sobering reason why one might not want to appear more courageous than one is in reality: envy. Laches' is sensitive to this pernicious but very real problem of political life, an issue to which Nicias was apparently oblivious. For the courageous man who practices fighting in armor, the *pretense* of this knowledge, as Laches' use of the term wisdom tacitly reveals, may make one a target for close scrutiny and envy. It is a concern that potentially limits Laches' desire for command and distinction. The relation between knowledge or wisdom and envy, and Laches' stance toward this problem, will turn out to have far-reaching implications, ones that are critical to understanding the second half the dialogue.

Laches, like Nicias, concludes his assessment speaking directly to Lysimachus. However, unlike Nicias, who has exhorted Laches to speak, Laches now exhorts Socrates "to give counsel on his opinion about the subject that lies before us" (184c). Laches' request suggests that Laches is either not entirely sure of his position, or, more likely, that he assumes Socrates will agree with his position. At any rate, Laches, in directing the conversation to Socrates, is insistent that Socrates provide his opinion on fighting in armor. Laches' continued attention to Socrates is a further indication of his presuming an implicit alliance between the two of them.

In sum, the entirety of Laches' account is centered upon empirical reality, particularly as he experienced it. It is a forceful appeal to the way things are in practice, undercutting the theoretical analysis provided by Nicias. Empirical reality is invoked on the public and private level, with fighting in armor failing to pass the

[32] The traditional contrast between Athens and Sparta is perhaps best captured by the exaggerated but telling speech of the Corinthians, in Thucydides, 1.70. Cf. also 1.80-85 and 2.35-46.

public test of Sparta, and failing the individual test of providing an exemplar worthy of trust. Laches' rebuttal illustrates a major thread of the dialogue; Nicias' theoretical approach is put into question by the test of practice, as personified by Laches. It is the first substantial indication of what is at stake in Socrates' implicit alliance with Laches, and what is at stake in Plato's choice of title.

III. Socrates on Education and Inquiry (184d-187d)

(i) Socrates' re-founding of the discussion (184d-186a)

Lysimachus re-enters the conversation, offering a democratic solution to the disagreement between Nicias and Laches. The debate is to be decided by majority decision, among the small group of experts, with Socrates holding the deciding vote. The suggestion is curious, considering Lysimachus began the dialogue stating that he has chosen Laches and Nicias as counselors precisely because of what he judged as their expertise and care for the issue (178b). Lysimachus' original plan obviously refutes the idea that in such matters the number of votes is decisive; by acknowledging experts, he has tacitly agreed that the expert's opinion should rule majority opinion. What, then, has changed since this acknowledgement of Laches and Nicias' expertise? One thing that has changed is that the two alleged experts, those who should be able to ground authoritative opinion in a way that Lysimachus cannot, have disagreed. More than simple disagreement, Nicias' and Laches' contradictory positions represent the inconclusiveness of military *authority.* Military authority alone, Nicias' and Laches' disagreement suggests, cannot resolve the issue of whether or not the children should study or practice fighting in armor. In addition, Nicias' and Laches' own contrasting starting points—theory versus practice, respectively—represent divergent authorities that may only be resolved by a fundamental transformation in the manner of discussion. The dialogue's transition to this point thereby simulates the transition from everyday advice to philosophy, by

showing how conflicting opinions arouse the desire to get beyond opinion to knowledge.

Lysimachus, however, reveals he is incapable of resolving the disagreement, and is unable to successfully foster a successful transition to philosophy. Not only does Lysimachus see no other way to decide the matter than by vote, he also admits that he is not qualified to participate in that vote. This is not to say there is no plausibility to Lysimachus' deference to majority vote, as popular opinion is often quite reliable in judging expertise, particularly in the arts. Laches has provided one reason why this is so, namely that one may often straightforwardly judge how well an alleged expert performs his art, or one may often straightforwardly judge the products of an expert's craft. Stesilaus is ridiculous, despite his expertise in fighting in armor, because he visibly does not possess expertise in the art of war, and because he cannot attain the military success he desires. Moreover, the very idea of fame in war—a fame that Lysimachus and Melesias are seeking for the boys—is inherently tied to the belief that many may differentiate between who is and who is not an expert in war. Fame is awarded for deeds in war, as these deeds are considered proof of one's expertise in war.

If the issue of the expert and his relation to popular opinion seems tangential, at best, Socrates' next move suggests otherwise. Rather than express his opinions about fighting in armor, Socrates ironically turns to Melesias to ask for his opinion on the propriety of deciding the issue by majority decision. In so doing, Socrates does not simply ask for Melesias' opinion, but implies that Melesias' opinion should be taken into account. It may therefore be relevant that it is only at his point in the

dialogue that all of the interlocutors, including Melesias, have spoken. Of course, there is good reason for both Melesias and Lysimachus having a say in the manner in which the conversation is conducted. In the first instance, at least, the men are present to counsel him, as well as Lysimachus, and it is the two elderly fathers' boys who will be receiving the proffered education. If the result of the discussion is to be dependent on the expert, and his counsel, Melesias and Lysimachus must be willing to enact the advice, once given. Socrates' consultation with both elderly fathers, having them take an active part in the re-founding of the discussions, ensures that they continue to have an interest in the discussion.

The problem, in the present case, is complicated by Melesias disagreement with Lysimachus on the best way to conduct the discussion. The disagreement arises as a result of Socrates' question to Melesias: would he obey the trainer (the expert), or the four men present (majority opinion), when he is seeking a trainer for his son? Melesias chooses the obvious response, that he would choose the expert, and thereby agrees to the position that "what is to be finely judged…must be judged by knowledge, not by majority" (184e). Melesias' implicit disagreement with Lysimachus thus calls Lysimachus' authority in conducting the discussion into question, a disagreement that cannot be resolved democratically. For even if Lysimachus and Melesias were to agree to vote on how to conduct the discussion, an agreement that avails itself of the expert opinion that such matters should be decided democratically, their conflicting votes—Lysimachus for a democratic resolution on fighting in armor, and Melesias for the seeking of an expert on fighting in armor—tacitly leaves Socrates with a new deciding vote: how to conduct the discussion.

All this is to say that Socrates has just proved, in practice, the existence of experts in ruling discussions. Socrates is therefore able to now state that "it is necessary to examine this first, whether or not one of us is expert in that about which we are deliberating. And if so, it is necessary to obey him, albeit one man, and to let the others go, and if not, to seek someone else" (185). Socrates goes on to make a concern that echoes throughout the dialogue explicit:

> Or do you and Lysimachus think that what you have at stake is something small but not what happens to be the greatest of your possessions? For presumably when sons become valuable (*chrēstōn*) or the opposite, so too the whole household of the father will be governed in a manner corresponding to whatever sort the children become. (185a)

Socrates, playing on Lysimachus' own desire to see his son become as valuable as possible, begins to move the discussion away from expertise to the son's goodness. Such an education, Socrates intimates, is not only for the sake of the children, but it is also for the sake of the entire household; well-governed, valuable sons generate a well-governed household. Socrates' emphasis on the importance of children for the governing of a household may also be for Laches' sake, given Laches' earlier confession (180b).

After establishing the expert's superiority over the opinions of the majority, Socrates in effect manages to have the entire consultation start over, stating "that they have not come to an agreement from the beginning on whatever it is about which we are deliberating and examining which of us is expert (and got teachers for this purpose) and which of us is not" (185bd). Socrates therefore draws attention to the fact that the first consultative exercise, which revealed the disagreement between Nicias and Laches, and which rested upon rhetorical displays, will not lead beyond

opinion. A different, perhaps more radical approach is required to resolve the problem of the children's education. The placement of this new beginning raises an obvious question. Why have we received such a lengthy dramatic development of the dialogue, with lengthy speeches by both Nicias and Laches? In this regard, it is worth noting that the discussion thus far has been dominated by political concerns, and conducted in a political manner. That is, it has consisted mainly of long speeches such as characterize rhetoric, rather than brief question and answers that allow for careful, step-by-step examinations. The change in the manner of speech reflects the movement from political concerns of expertise in war and the acquisition of fame to philosophic concerns of more permanent importance. This pattern recurs in the dialogue; the more general questions of the second half of the dialogue are not overtly theoretical questions that one may take up in the abstract. Rather, they arise out of political life and its attendant concerns, a political life that is dramatically represented in the first half of the dialogue.

In a fundamental sense, however, the movement from the perplexities of everyday political life to philosophy is a quite natural movement, and is, in fact, the natural birth of all philosophizing. Consequently, one must wonder why the *Laches*, of all Plato's dialogues, has such a lengthy "prelude" to what becomes its thematic issue—for the whole dialogue turns out to be an examination of a certain type of courage. It is this problem—the nature of manly or political courage—that most sheds light on why the *Laches* has this peculiar dramatic structure. Of the traditional virtues, courage is the virtue most readily seen. A display of courage is more easily recognized than a display of moderation or wisdom, making it the most prominent,

most public, virtue. The dialogue's presumed setting is thus a gymnasium or training field: public, masculine, and essentially tied to the political realm. The public character of courage is relevant as it provides for a display of courage prior to a (potentially courageous) analysis of courage; and insofar as courage is—or at least seems to be—more public and more capable of display than the other virtues, it is a more fitting subject of drama.

Nicias promptly offers an answer to Socrates' assertion, "that they have not come to an agreement from the beginning on whatever it is about which we are deliberating and examining which of us is expert", claiming that the purpose of the discussion thus far has been to assess the practice of fighting in armor, a response that reveals his own limited interpretation of the issue at hand. Nicias' limited interpretation is perhaps best seen in light of Socrates response.

Socrates raises two examples, ostensibly to show that current discussion is not simply about fighting in armor, but also about something more basic. The first example is medical in nature, regarding the health of human eyes. If one is assessing a drug one would smear on eyes, the deliberation is about the eyes, not the drug. This is because the drug is for the sake of the eyes. Socrates' first example seems to justify the move from a discussion on the physical benefits of fighting in armor—both for the sake of the city and for the sake of physical excellence—to a discussion that examines "a study for the sake of the soul of the young men" (185e). The example has additional import, particularly because eyes are themselves part of a larger whole. One cannot claim knowledge of eyes unless one can give a comprehensive explanation of the relationship between eyes and sight, *and* a comprehensive

explanation of what eyes and sight are for, including the highest or proper ends of sight. This suggests that one cannot limit oneself to the eyes, and then to the bodily good of sight; one must, in turn, ask whether or not healthy eyes and thus sight are for the sake of something else. Of course, eyes are for the something else, namely the utility of sight for the person seeing. In addition to this utilitarian benefit, human sight is also a means for seeing beautiful or noble sights. It is for these two reasons, utility and beauty, that a man seeks a drug to cure his eyes, in the same way one presumably seeks a study to treat one's soul. The individual nature of this example might seem to suggest that the proper end of a practice is the individual. As we will see, however, Socrates' second example should make one cautious of accepting this individualistic conception of man too quickly. These dual metaphors of sight and medicine continue to play a prominent role in the dialogue.

Socrates' second example, "that when someone examines whether or not, and when, a bridle should be put on a horse, presumably he is then deliberating about the horse, not about the bridle" (185d), implicitly raises major questions regarding pedagogy and the proper end of man. Nicias assents to Socrates' question, yet it is not entirely obvious that he is correct. The mention of the bridle introduces an obvious third term; horses are not bridled for their sake, but for the sake of the human being riding the horse. The bridle's sole purpose is to restrain the horse from pursuing its own inclinations against the inclinations of the rider (cf. 191ab). For this reason, there is an obvious difference between the good of a wild horse and the good of a domesticated horse. As a result, Socrates implicitly raises the question of whether or not the education of a youth is akin to the bridle of a horse, and therefore

something that constrains human beings for the sake of something else (e.g., the city). If education, or a particular kind of education, is akin to a bridle—an external impediment that is designed to discipline a horse's spirit—a student would be "tamed" by his education, for the sake of political life. Consequently, one may argue that the rebelliousness and high-spiritedness that attends most youths must be "bridled", so that they are able to live in accord with the responsibilities that accompany public life. However, this is not to say that the metaphor of the bridle is a necessarily negative portrait of education, as such young men may genuinely profit from being bridled, even if primarily to serve the good of others' interests. This service may require, if perhaps only for some natures, that one's spirit is moderated so as not to clash with the interests of one's fellow citizens. Of course, the cultivation of such men is in the city's interest in the same way a good warhorse is in the interest of the horseman or the charioteer.

Socrates' loaded example of the horse leads to a related question of profound philosophic importance, a question that is fundamental to any attempt to explore the question of the proper end of man. Is man political *by nature?* This question is occasioned by the distinction between a domesticated horse and a wild or "natural" horse, a point that reveals a difficulty in studying nature; a horse is naturally disposed to being domesticated. Socrates' example of horses thus begs to be compared to the human case, a comparison that quickly reveals the essential difference between the domestication of horses and the education of human beings. For human beings, in contrast to horses, need education to become human, a point that greatly supports the view that man is, in fact, political by nature. That is to say a wild "human being",

who has had not had the benefit of education, and thus who has not been "bridled" by political life, is no human being at all. One key example that proves this point is the role that language, and thus *convention*, plays in the fulfillment of human nature.

There is also a second major pedagogic problem that arises from this example, the issue of timing in education. The problem is clearly occasioned by Socrates, who not only mentions "whether or not…a bridle should be put on a horse", but also asks "*when* a bridle should be put on a horse". Socrates includes the timing of bridles, because a bridle must be placed upon a horse at the proper time to create the best possible effect. Thus, on the one hand, a bridle that is placed upon a horse that is too young may break its spirit to an extent that retards the horse's development. On the other hand, a bridle that is placed upon a horse that is too old may not have a significant impact on the nature of the horse. In like fashion, the question of the children's age is of major importance, as an inopportune age may seriously call into question their ability to undergo a serious education (cf. 200c). But there is also a second dramatic analogue that must be born in mind as the dialogue develops; Socrates' treatment of Laches and Nicias, particularly in the second half of the dialogue, may be greatly determined by the age of the two generals. Unlike the youths present, who are likely very impressionable, the two generals may be too solidly formed to experience a major transformation in their souls.

Notably, Socrates, prior to asserting that the study is for the souls of the young men, argues that the interlocutors must first "examine the counselor too, as to whether he is expert in the care of that for the sake of which [they] are examining what [they] are examining" (185d). Socrates has moved the issue of the expert away from his

potential role as a trainer, and now emphasizes his role as a *counselor*. The two mentions of counselor prior to this are by Lysimachus and Laches, referring to the role of Laches and Nicias as counselors (179e, 180c); the initial mentions are a reminder that a counselor is one who gives advice, rather than one who trains another in an art. Socrates' move to counselors thus entails an analysis of studies or "learnables" rather than practices; if one is counseling a study of the soul, it must be a study that is potentially learnable by virtue of its counsel. That is to say that the rational account, if apprehended, must be a sufficient basis for acting in accord with the account. Accordingly, Socrates asks Nicias whether or not they "are examining a *study* for the sake of the soul of the young men" (185e, emphasis added); the mention of practice is absent. The theoretically inclined Nicias noticeably assents to Socrates' question.

In formulating the discussion in this manner, Socrates emphasizes the good of the souls of the young men, thereby suggesting that it is entirely their good that is at stake in their education. This emphasis recalls a major question regarding education. In Lysimachus' and Melesias' view of their sons, as able to win fame for their households, and in the example of the household that Socrates gave, where the sons affect the rule of the household, it was clear why the fathers would educate or seek out an education for their sons. In either case, good sons create good households that the fathers themselves will enjoy. Yet if the soul of the student is the sole concern in education—rather than the good the son will bring to the household or to the city—one must address the motivation of the educator.

On this note, Socrates turns to the care of the soul. Socrates requires that those who are expert counselors must first be experts in caring for souls. In the first instance, Socrates seems to suggest that such experts must show that they are experts at caring for their own soul; no man who is expert at caring for souls, and who truly taught such an art, would neglect the soul most valuable to him. In other words, Laches' intervention, on behalf of self-made men, correctly points out that not all expertise is acquired through teachers. The root of Laches' concern is his admiration for self-sufficiency and self-mastery. As the example of Socrates proves (cf. 186c), some men are able to become great without a teacher. Socrates concedes that he does know of such men, yet they do not help one find experts in caring for the soul. Consequently, Socrates points to the difference between caring for one's own soul and having a teacher that teaches one to care for one's own soul—what is at issue in such counsel is *education.*

Socrates immediately translates Laches' concern for self-made men into the question of a craftsman and his work, claiming that Laches "would not be willing to trust [such self-made men], if they claimed they were good craftsmen, unless they could show [Laches] some work of their art that was well done, either one or more" (185ea). Socrates' analogy is effective because a craftsman's product is easily observable. To show one is a good craftsman, one simply points to one's work. Socrates suggests, then, that a teacher can display his successful students to demonstrate that he is a good teacher. For instance, a running trainer can point to the improved swiftness of his students as a sure indicator of his training expertise. Conversely, someone who claims they are a teacher of an art or practice, but who

does not have any good students to show for it, immediately becomes suspect; a running trainer who did not improve the swiftness of his students would not be trusted as an expert running trainer.

However, there is an obvious danger in assuming that the example of the craftsman is perfectly analogous to education in virtue. Although the assessment of some teaching in virtue may be straightforward—a general, if able to teach courage, may be able to point to the courage of his rank and file as an example of his teaching courage—overall, the judgment of virtue is not an easy undertaking. One must not forget the popular charges brought against Socrates, and the many who judged him as a corrupter of youth. If one judges a teacher of virtue and his students like one judges a craftsmen and his products, one is given evidence that Athens' assessment of Socrates is the correct assessment. Socrates soon elaborates on this craftsman analogy, an elaboration that tacitly highlights the similarities and differences between caring for the soul and a craftsman and his products.

(ii) Socrates on teaching of the soul (186a-187d)

Having solicited Laches' agreement, Socrates now gives a lengthy speech—his longest in the dialogue—setting the project anew. His speech is divided into three main parts: the first part concludes the preceding section of the dialogue, warning that they must either reveal the teachers they have had in the art of caring for the soul, or give evidence of their own caring for souls, lest they inadvertently corrupt the boys through poor advice; the central part is Socrates' admission of his own ignorance in

regard to this art of caring for the soul; the third, echoing the first, is Socrates' advice to Lysimachus that he question Nicias and Laches with the purpose of revealing either what teachers of the art they have had, or their products of teaching if they themselves have discovered the art, so that Socrates and the fathers may seek out appropriate teachers.

Socrates begins by explicitly re-stating that the fathers' motivation is that of insuring their sons' "souls become as good as possible" (186a). In so doing, Socrates establishes a standard for a teacher of the soul, a standard that Laches and Nicias may make use of to assess those who have educated them in this art: such educators must attempt to make their students' "souls become as good as possible". Socrates includes an additional caveat, namely that the teachers must themselves be manifestly good. Socrates thus makes explicit what was earlier implicit; those claiming to be experts in caring for souls must themselves successfully care for their own souls. An expert in caring for the soul is bound to his own soul as a testament to his success or failure in the art. The claim to knowing how to care for souls necessarily entails recognizing the importance of caring for one's own soul, and having the means to accomplish this end. Consequently, Socrates rejects the very possibility of expert advice being given by men who do not themselves adequately and evidently care for their own souls. The unique character of this type of expertise, caring for the soul, can be seen in comparison to physical training. In athletics, one may separate a trainer's counsel on how best to train the body from the respective bodies of him who gives and him who obeys the counsel. In other words, an athletic trainer is able to possess knowledge of athletic training, without himself practicing athletic training.

For this reason, an athlete may become far better at his sport than his trainer. In contrast, a distinction between teachers who know but cannot practice caring for the soul, and students who do not know but may practice caring for the soul, is, in principle, impossible.

Socrates also asserts that a teacher who wishes to point to his own works "must show what Athenians or foreigners, whether slaves or free, have by general agreement become good because of him" (186b). Socrates' assertion hints at a number of political problems. The first, to be recalled in contrasting ways by Nicias and Laches, is the distinction between civic education ("Athenians") and cosmopolitan education ("foreigners"). At this point, Socrates' position regarding the relation of caring for the soul to that of a particular polity is equivocal. Throughout the dialogue, Nicias and Laches will respond to Socrates' equivocation in their own manners. The second problem is the difference between educating slaves and freemen. Socrates at the very least intimates that Athens' current slaves may not be, by nature, slaves, but may be capable of pursuing an education in virtue. The difficulty in educating such slaves, however, brings to light a problem inherent in education. For while it is clearly good for the slave to be liberated, having learned to care for his own soul, the benefit to the Athenian polity in having her slaves educated is not so clear. That is to say, since education liberates, those liberated from common opinions become potential enemies to the old opinions. Socrates' subtlety and politeness is evidence that he takes this problem seriously.

Socrates, in finishing these introductory remarks, warns that it is not fitting to educate men unless one can meet the above requirements. Socrates is clearly warning

Laches and Nicias regarding their roles in the discussion. This warning is alluded to again in the third part of the speech, after Socrates has proclaimed his own ignorance (187b). The obvious danger in educating men without meeting such requirements is corruption, and the danger is especially acute with men who are comrades. Socrates states that, in such a situation, to educate is to risk "the greatest blame from the nearest relatives" (186b). One's relatives, especially one's fathers, are most likely to react violently against those they believe corrupt their kinfolk. In order for any educator to make a case for his existence, he must defend himself against these accusers. Socrates has thus implicitly warned Laches and Nicias that if they are to advise Lysimachus and Melesias on an education for the boys, lacking sufficient knowledge of the effective goodness of such advice, they risk "getting the greatest blame" from the two fathers. Thus Plato, through Socrates' warning, alludes to reality behind the formal charges brought against Socrates. By claiming that "Socrates does injustice and is meddlesome, by investigating the things under the earth and the heavenly things, and by making the weaker speech the stronger, and by teaching others these same things",[33] his accusers, and particularly the fathers, were in reality blaming him for corrupting their kinfolk.

Turning to the second part of his speech, Socrates insists that *he* has not had a teacher of this art of caring for the soul. Socrates' claim of ignorance is clearly ironic; in making the claim that he has not had any teachers of this art, Socrates disregards his father, the city, and a host of other educators. Yet, Socrates, as any child, would have been reprimanded when he did what his elders regarded as unjust,

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[33] As quoted by Socrates in "The Apology of Socrates", in *Four Texts on Socrates*, trans. Thomas G. West and Grace Starry West (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1984), 19bc (Henceforth, *Apology*).

or licentious, or impious, and so on. He would have been told the traditional stories of Homer, dealing with the just and unjust, the courageous and cowardly, and the rest of virtue. There is, however, an important and decisive truth to Socrates' claim. Socrates has not had teachers of virtue who could prove themselves knowledgeable in virtue. Those who profess to know what virtue is, and to care for the soul accordingly, offer accounts of virtue that are insufficient. Socrates' assessment thus impugns his father and the fatherland as knowers and as teachers of virtue. However, unless Socrates teaches or persuades the fatherland that his presence is not pernicious, he is in danger of being blamed by those in kinship with the fatherland, the fathers. His ironic claim of ignorance on education is one means of avoiding such blame.

Socrates is noticeably silent on the second possibility: whether or not he has taught others in virtue. Although one may suspect that Socrates indeed teaches others, his relation to teaching is a question that pervades the dialogue. At this point, we may note that, like the claim of ignorance, Socrates' silence is an effective means of avoiding blame from the charges of corruption; it is harder to be blamed for corrupting the youth if one does not claim to teach. Socrates' silence on whether or not he has taught others, however, also points to the possibility that his "students" have actually engaged in a type of self-teaching. Socrates confirms this possibility, as he suggests that one may discover the art of caring for the soul, rather than learn it. The most obvious problem that is addressed by self-teaching, or by discovering the art rather than learning the art, is that it is a way of overcoming the necessarily disadvantaged position of being a student; one needs to distinguish, for instance, between good teachers and bad teachers. The second major problem overcome by

self-teaching is perhaps exemplified by the anomaly of Socrates. Socrates' existence presents the possibility that a higher man might naturally arise, a man qualitatively better than any before him. Of course, this possibility necessitates that such an individual has not been taught his specific virtue, but has discovered it for himself; he would know heights that no other man would know or have known hitherto.

In making the case for his ignorance, Socrates also mentions two reasons why Nicias and Laches may not be as ignorant as he: age and money. Age, Socrates argues, is relevant insofar as Nicias and Laches have simply had more time to discover the art of caring for one's own soul. Socrates certainly spares neither mercy nor irony—the elderly Lysimachus and Melesias, who opened the dialogue professing their ignorance on education, and commenting on their wasteful youths, are standing right there. However, there is an important truth in Socrates words, one that Nicias takes up in a slightly altered form. Those who devote their lives to pursuing questions of caring for the soul are better prepared to discuss such questions as they grow older. Socrates offers the obvious case; his constant concern for pursuing and testing potential teachers, exemplified by his pursuing and testing Laches and Nicias as potential teachers, ensures that his true peak—that is, his intellectual peak—remains ever before him. If the young sons are attentive enough to recognize the disparity between Socrates' and their fathers' approaches to age and learning, the choice of how they should spend their youth should be clear. Socrates' second reason, money, points directly to the only ones "who proclaim themselves able to make [Socrates] noble and good": the sophists (186c). Nicias and Laches, because they have more money, may have better learned the art of caring for the soul from the

sophists. Socrates' first mention of the sophists thus separates his activities from theirs by one distinguishing feature: they teach for money, while he simply wishes to care for the soul. In fact, Socrates positively avoids teaching for money (he did, after all, turn down Nicias' offer to teach Niceratus; 180d), and tacitly ranks money as practically irrelevant in comparison to the care of one's soul. One may also add, as Socrates seems to hint, that since Nicias has purchased a professional teacher of music for his son (180d), and has not exhausted all his money, it would be "amazing" if Nicias had not already acquired the art for himself.

Having "established" his own ignorance, Socrates turns to the third part of his speech. Directing his words at Lysimachus, Socrates positively begs him not to "let Laches or Nicias go but to question them" (186d). That he continues to accord this political respect to Lysimachus is an important feature not only of this speech, but of the entire dialogue, especially considering Lysimachus is quite willing to turn the issue over to the three experts for discussion. Not to be forgotten is the importance of familial and political hierarchy that functions in the background of the discussion. It is not always the experts who rule, and Socrates' politeness, including his irony, is an exemplification of how one must act in the face of one's formal superiors. Its necessity is amplified when one considers, as Socrates has just prompted us to do, the age of the young men present, an age regularly accompanied by rebelliousness. In spite of this natural unruliness, however, the children have been impressed by Socrates' own power on previous occasions (180ea), and thus the formal respect that he directs toward Lysimachus and Melesias gives the children a clear impression of how they ought to act. Socrates is therefore attempting to ameliorate the problem he

himself addressed, namely that one may incur the greatest blame from the fathers of those one educates. One the one hand, Socrates uses ironic and polite speech to defer to those who are not of his kin, but are the familial or political kin of his students. On the other hand, those who discern Socrates' motivations for such speech, and thus appreciate his considerate use of irony, are thereby made his kin and thus his allies.

In the bulk of this third part of the speech, Laches and Nicias are finally called to account by Socrates, who brings to light the implications of his earlier words on Nicias' and Laches' tacit claims to know. As he states:

> ...Laches and Nicias, tell us with what man who is terribly clever concerning the rearing of the young you have associated and whether you know through having learned from someone or through discovering for yourselves, and if you learned, who is the teacher of each of you and what other people are expert in the same art with them—in order that, if you do not have leisure on account of the affairs of the city, we may go to them and persuade them with gifts or favors or both to take care both of our children and of yours so that they will not put their ancestors to shame by becoming base. (186ea)

Laches and Nicias are clearly being pressed by Socrates, not simply in reference to their offering advice in the beginning of the dialogue, but also in reference to the way they conduct their lives.

To elucidate the problem, Socrates closes by returning to the analogy of the craftsmen. He compares education to the making of pottery, an art that can vary greatly in difficulty depending on what is being produced. Socrates' example shows one reason why the products of a teacher may be the indicator of whom we should seek as teachers. In the case of pottery, having technical "knowledge" is not enough for expertise in the art; one also needs to practice in order to acquire the skill to produce fine pottery. That Socrates uses this example as an analogue to education recalls an important facet of *teaching* such arts—the art of teaching pottery is not the

same as the art of pottery itself, and thus knowing how to *teach* pottery requires knowledge and practice distinct from the knowledge and practice required to produce fine pottery. In other words, one may be a fine potter but a poor teacher of pottery. Consequently, if one is seeking a *teacher* of pottery, one is best served by assessing a *teacher's* "products"—his students—as opposed to assessing merely his pottery.

Socrates therefore intimates that educating others in virtue entails the same habituation and practice that is required in the crafts. Socrates had made a similar argument when he began his request for a teacher of caring for the soul; the goal was to find a teacher who has taught "*many* youths" (186ab, emphasis added). Implied in this discussion is the suggestion that Socrates is responsible for all of his "students", his early works and his later works, Alcibiades or Critias no less than Plato or Xenophon. Reflection on the analogy, and on Socrates' own multifarious students, raises the question of exactly how pottery is akin to educating others in virtue. The most obvious difference is that, unlike the potter's material, an educator's "material" is not lifeless, but rather has inclinations of its own. This difference, however, is in some sense implicit in the analogy. A potter may not have to worry about his clay consciously rejecting the form he attempts to place upon it, but he must tailor his practice to the type of clay with which he is working. In the same way, the educator seems to have to know the nature of the student he is teaching to care properly for the student's soul which he is attempting to shape.

Another key difference is that pottery is easily visible, whereas seeing the virtue of a student's soul is difficult. That is because, unlike the material and thus visible pot, virtue is a disposition of an invisible soul. The relation between a

student's soul and his outward appearance is further complicated by the fact that human beings consciously manipulate their appearance to seem more virtuous than they are in reality, a fact attested to by the dialogue's constant concern with honesty. Moreover, even if virtue was readily apparent, the agreement regarding what constitutes a good or even masterly work of pottery does not exist in matters of virtue. Knowing what virtue is, so that one knows what virtue one should be pursuing, is a significant problem in its own right. One final problem with the analogy is that a potter is typically the sole creator of a work of pottery. In contrast, no teacher of virtue is the sole influence on his student, a fact that leaves students open to influences that may corrupt or negate their education. For this reason, Socrates, inasmuch as he is a teacher of virtue, is limited in being able to prevent corrupting influences from affecting his students, and is only responsible for Alcibiades or Critias insofar as it is his teaching and example that is heeded.

Socrates closes his appeal to Nicias and Laches with a reflective question: "which of these do [they] assert or deny is applicable and appropriate to [them]" (187b)? His open ended question not only questions Nicias and Laches regarding their tacit claims to know, it also has them respond to the assertions they believe most "applicable and appropriate", a process that will reveal much about their own souls, and their own thoughts regarding caring for the soul. This is particularly true because of Socrates' pervasive irony; Nicias and Laches, divergent characters as they are, both have reason to suspect that Socrates is ratifying their own basic approach to education. However, before Nicias and Laches respond, Lysimachus must speak, for he, in line with the polite respect Socrates accorded him during his speech, has been

given the chance to approve of Socrates' plan.

Lysimachus unsurprisingly ratifies Socrates' plan, and reveals he is not unaware of the implied criticisms of his own life. Indeed, Socrates' speech has brought out the best in Lysimachus, or has at least motivated him to give the best slant on his previous actions. As he claims,

> I began at the start by saying that we summoned you into consultation because we thought you had most likely been concerned about such things, especially since your children, just like ours are pretty much of an age to be educated…For this too that [Socrates] says is good, that we are now deliberating about the greatest of our things. (187d)

According to Lysimachus, then, caring for their children's soul, and not fame, was the proper interpretation of their consultation all along. With Lysimachus' nominal confirmation, Nicias and Laches may now respond to Socrates' challenge.

IV. Nicias and Laches on Socrates and Speeches (187d-189d)

(i) Nicias on Socrates and speeches (187d-188c)

Nicias is the first to respond to Lysimachus, and is therefore the first to reveal what he believes essential in Socrates' speech. Nicias, as before, presents a sophisticated position, which begins with a tacit counter-example to Socrates' earlier claim regarding the household, that one can judge the father by virtue of the son (185a). Nicias makes this readily clear by pointing to the example that is before them; Socrates is radically different from his own father. Nicias also implicitly asserts that the more important bonds of kinship are not those of the traditional family, to which Lysimachus has appealed. Rather, they are the universal ties of human reason; those close to Socrates in speech are "as if in kinship" with him (187e). Consequently, Nicias, responding to Socrates' equivocal cue, hints at the possibility of a cosmopolitan community, composed of men who transcend the city in and through the universal bonds of rational speech. He clearly believes himself to be a part of this community.

Nicias' account of Socrates furthers the impression that he is "in kinship" with him. He first gives a portrait of Socratic inquiry, arguing that those who discuss with him, even if they have "earlier begun a discussion about something else, must of necessity not stop but be led around in speech by him until [they fall] into giving an account of [themselves], the way [they] now [live], and the way" they have lived their past lives (188a). Nicias, whose last agreement with Socrates was only that they were

"examining a study for the sake of the soul of the young men" (185e), has clearly taken notice of Socrates' intention to move the discussion from the caring of souls of the young men to a reflective assessment of their own care for their own souls. In fact, he states that he has previously undergone such inquiry, and that he fully expects to undergo such inquiry in the present discussion. Moreover, he professes positively to rejoice at keeping Socrates company, and thinks that

> ...it is no bad thing to be reminded of what we have done or are doing that is not noble; rather, he must necessarily be more forethoughtful for his life afterward who does not flee these things but is willing and deems it worthwhile, in accordance with Solon's saying, to learn as long as he lives and does not think that an old age possessed of intelligence will come forward of itself. (188b)

Nicias thus emphasizes that Socratic questioning may lead one to be more forethoughtful for one's future, a process that leads to "an old age possessed of intelligence". As earlier remarked, Nicias thereby echoes Socrates' reference to age as an indicator of "intelligence" or wisdom, but only as a necessary, not a sufficient condition. Nicias, continuing to emphasize his kinship with Socrates, finally adds that "it is nothing unaccustomed or unpleasant to be put to the test by Socrates"—all this before handing over the discussion to "see how Laches here stands concerning such a thing" (188bc). In short, Nicias has attempted to affirm that what is "applicable and appropriate" to him are many of the same things that are "applicable and appropriate" to Socrates.

Everything, that is, except Socrates' ignorance. For unlike Socrates, Nicias' account of being questioned never comes to the conclusion that Nicias' is ignorant on such matters. The closest he comes to Socratic ignorance is admitting, in the abstract, that it is "no bad thing to be reminded of what we have done or are doing that is not

noble". In fact, although Nicias has clearly gone to some lengths in his speech to ally himself with Socrates, the more one presses Nicias account, the more one may doubt Nicias' and Socrates' kinship. Nicias' endorsement of the relative pleasantness of the Socratic life, for instance, is, at best, halfhearted. Although he "rejoices" in keeping Socrates company, and although he sees the usefulness of such questioning as a means to acquiring future goods, he only finds it "nothing…unpleasant" to endure such questioning, and makes double mention of the "suffering" entailed in it. Moreover, Nicias' account of a wise old age, acquired through a life of forethought, is in subtle contrast to Socrates' account of age, which had intimated instead that one's intellectual peak is, or rather should be, always in one's future.

One may also be suspicious when one recalls that Nicias did not invite Socrates into the conversation, in spite of his clearly knowing Socrates and his significant abilities. Although Socrates may not have been the most obvious choice when seeking an advisor for fighting in armor, the hints of Nicias' discomfort when faced with Socratic inquiry, and his belief that Socrates quickly leads any discussion to this type of questioning, suggests that Nicias would have been quite content not having Socrates invited to the conversation. Nicias' account of Socrates, and the intimation that Nicias may have attempted to avoid his questioning from the start, thus points to an important example of courage or cowardice in speech—that is, of moral and intellectual courage or cowardice. Nicias clearly states that he believes it is ultimately good to undergo Socratic inquiry, in spite of the suffering it may entail. Insofar as this is truly the case, then, he should be *willing* to endure such "suffering", and he should be *willing* to overcome his fear of future "suffering", in order to

achieve "an old age possessed of intelligence" (188b). The converse, of course, is also true: fleeing from Socratic questioning, because one fears the pain it will bring, is a clear act of moral cowardice.

(ii) Laches on Socrates and speeches (188c-189b)

Laches, having been prompted to speak by Nicias, once again responds to Athenian sophistication with Spartan simplicity, even taking pride in this distinction between the two men. Laches is quick to point out, however, that this simplicity may appear "double" to others such as Nicias—which is to say, to men who are fond of making subtle distinctions (cf. 197d). Specifically, Laches clarifies that he may appear at once to be both a "lover of speech and…a hater of speech" (188c). Laches' clarification reveals a twofold purpose. First, Laches' dichotomy, either hating or loving speech, is determined by a singular standard: the relation of the speeches to the deeds of the man speaking them. Second, Laches' dichotomy reveals that he is not indifferent to speech, but rather responds to speech with emotion—loving or hating the speech depending on the relation of the speech to its speaker.

As Laches tells it, when he hears a man "discussing virtue or some wisdom who is truly a man and worthy of the speeches he is uttering, [he] rejoices extraordinarily upon seeing that the speaker and the things said are suitable and harmonious with each other" (188cd). Laches, then, positively rejoices when a true man speaks well, meaning that his speeches accord with his deeds. In making such a distinction, Laches also makes clear that he believes the virtuous man, masculine and

courageous in nature ("truly a man"), to be superior to the so-called "wise man", whose reputation rests solely on his cleverness in speaking. However, Laches does not reject speeches out of hand, and does not espouse a hatred of logos, as it might appear at first blush. For Laches, the truly musical man is the one who is in tune with the Dorian mode, the harmonious man of deeds who only accords speech its proper place in virtue. Laches, in fact, is absolutely "musical" in describing it:

> ...such a [true man] is altogether musical: he has tuned himself to the finest harmony, not on the lyre or instruments of play, but really to live his own life as a concord of speeches in relation to deeds—not in the Ionian...or the Phrygian or Lydian but simply in the Dorian, which is the sole Greek *harmonia*. (188d)

Laches, then, does not reject the musical man, but rather, using his terms somewhat metaphorically, rejects a certain type of musical man. He rejects the soft, effeminate, *overly* musical man, whose skills are in relation to the implements of music-making, rather than war-making. In sum, it is *harmony* between speech and deed, not deed itself, that is Laches' standard for virtue in speech.

One may well ask, however, why Laches has such a strong reaction to harmony or disharmony between speech and deed. The issue for Laches is clearly not the goodness or badness of the speech. Rather, it is the *relation* between speeches and deeds that causes Laches to "rejoice extraordinarily upon seeing that the speaker and the things said are suitable and harmonious with each other" (188d), or to feel pain "*all the more* the better [a man unworthy of the speeches that he is uttering] seems to speak" (188e, emphasis added). Laches' concern for harmony is implicitly based on his concerns for beauty and justice. As his reference to music implies, Laches first of all finds his type of harmonious men more aesthetically pleasing. His

exaltation when confronted with harmonious and thus beautiful men, and his repulsion when confronted with hypocritical and boastful, hence disharmonious and thus ugly men, also bespeaks Laches' concern for justice and his notion of justice: it is most fitting and thus most just that a man speak "in tune" with his nature as revealed in performance. For this reason, Laches finds Socrates, who has proven himself in deeds, "to be *worthy* of noble speeches and of complete frankness" (189a, emphasis added). Conversely, Laches' anger at those who speak well, while lacking the corresponding deeds, is a measure of his indignation: it is *unjust* for men to appear better than they truly are.

On the basis of this standard of the harmonious man, Laches has the audacity to attempt to refine Solon's saying, adding that he is "willing in growing old to be taught many things but only by worthy men" (189a). Laches is clearly responding to Nicias' account, which accorded speech a high place in human affairs, and which embraced the Athenian regime, including the wisdom and poetry of its founder. In contrast, Laches, the apparent public spirited rustic who accords speech the lower place in virtue, is critical of his own regime and the words of its founder—words that are twisted into a piece of Laconic wisdom. That Laches' argument is Spartan in character can be readily seen in relation to Rousseau's memorable description of an episode in the council of Sparta:

> A man of bad morals having offered a good suggestion in the council of Sparta, the Ephors, without taking any notice of him, had the same suggestion brought forward by a good Citizen. What an honor for the one, what a disgrace for the other, without either of them having been praised or blamed![34]

Laches therefore reveals his admiration for honest and public-spirited men, those who

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[34]Rousseau, Jean-Jacques, "On the Social Contract", in *The Social Contract and other later political writings*, ed., Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), IV.7.

do not falsely augment their greatness by deception or by clever speech. The traditional association between courageous manliness and honesty is grounded on the fact that, if deception and clever speeches are laid aside, one's political courage or cowardice would be laid bare for all to see. Laches' appeal, then, recalls the truthful and honest side of Socratic irony; Socrates' irony allows him to avoid lying outright, and allows him to show an honest face to those who are capable of comprehending him. That he is honest in this way is a reminder of the deleterious effects of lying on one's soul—if one is accustomed to lying, self-honesty becomes even more difficult than it ordinarily is.

This is not to say that Laches' rejection of Solon's advice, or his general account of speeches, is philosophically sound. The over-arching difficulty contained in Laches' account is that his conception of virtue exalts practice over thought in such a way as to denigrate wisdom *per se*. Laches, by only respecting practical knowledge, where there is a obvious connection between speech and deed, disregards knowledge and knowledge seeking for which there is no clear use. As a result, Laches' view is essentially irrelevant regarding any knowledge sought merely for its own sake. Mathematics, and most of the study of nature (particularly in the ancient sense), is a superfluous use of speeches when judged from Laches' standpoint. One may suspect, then, that Laches disdains those who seek intelligible realities, such as the mathematician or the natural philosopher.

Laches' standard, almost certainly unbeknownst to him, is also open to a less than salutary interpretation. Laches' standard of harmony of speech to deed would call for rejoicing at harmony, not only between virtuous speeches and deeds, but also

between vicious speeches and vicious deeds. This problem with Laches' account results from his inability to comprehend theoreticals and unseen reality generally; implicitly denying the reality of ideas that are not empirically grounded, he overlooks a standard of goodness that may be found in speech itself, and may be used to rank speeches on their own terms. Without being able to argue for a rational idea of the good, that is real apart from its presence in the visible realm, Laches reduces the goodness of speech solely to its accordance with a man's (good or bad) deeds—that is to say, with what are *reputed* to be such.

Furthermore, although finding an exemplar of a particular virtue or virtue entire is an excellent beginning to finding out whether or not they are able to teach their excellence, there also a number of limitations to such an approach. First, one limits oneself to those potential teachers who have been given the opportunity to display their virtue publicly, or to those potential teachers who have been awarded honor for their expertise. Yet, the dialogue began with Lysimachus passing over Socrates precisely because he had not heard of Socrates' exploits in war. Laches' position also rests on the further assumptions that the exemplars of the virtues are those who are in fact ready to make public displays, and that true virtue is capable of being displayed publicly, which is to say in the traditionally masculine realm. Again, Socrates' own example reminds us that the best warriors may not be those who seek the conventional martial life, and Socrates' peculiar nature should at least have us question whether or not the most virtuous men seek conventional distinction in public life. Nicias may have over-eagerly ascribed a cosmopolitan disposition to Socrates, but Laches over-eagerly assumes Socrates' ties to conventional public life.

This leads to perhaps the most far-reaching problem; Laches' account presumes that one will be able to recognize virtue if one comes across it. However, as noted previously, any student must grapple with the difficulty that the nature of the student-teacher relationship is inherently asymmetrical. Presuming one may judge one's teachers in virtue rests on the basic belief that one already knows what virtue *is*, and that one is capable of recognizing and ranking its instantiations. Education—as a qualitative change in how one understands virtue and how one associates with virtue—is effectively denied. For this same reason, Laches' standard precludes the possibility of being challenged by philosophic standpoints if advanced by men who cannot live up to their teachings. Yet, as Laches himself admits, it certainly seems as though a potential teacher may give good speeches, even when that teacher is unable to live up to his own speeches. Moreover, some may be able to give good advice precisely because they have learned the hard way: from their own mistakes. Indeed, some men may have simply made a mess of their own lives, and may be able to provide eloquent testimony concerning their failings. The dialogue, of course, opened on Lysimachus' testimony to similar effect. As a result, respecting only the speeches of men who live up to their deeds may cause one to neglect teachers that do have something worthwhile to teach, despite their lack of substantive deeds. Given that one cannot be certain that one will find an equally good speaker, who is also able to live up to his speeches, counting on this possibility leaves one at the mercy of chance. Since Laches' standard for speech is harmony with the speaker's deeds, he has discarded the higher standard of pursuing the greatest speeches, and thus has effectively discarded the standard of seeking a harmony between the greatest

speeches and the greatest deeds.

That Laches believes he knows what virtue is is emphasized as he ends his speech. He closes by handing over command to Socrates, a move that precipitates the central turn of the dialogue. The command is given "both to teach and to refute" Laches, however Socrates wishes (189b), a process that Laches asserts will be pleasant insofar as it is a virtuous man, proven on the battlefield of Delium, who is doing the questioning.

Socrates responds by releasing Laches and Nicias from blame "for not being ready both to consult and to examine together" (189c). Socrates thereby points to an implication of a pedagogic problem that has thus far hindered the dialogue: if a student is ignorant regarding what virtue is, he is also less culpable for not being virtuous. That is, if one does not recognize what virtue is, one can no longer be blamed for *willingly* doing vice. However, one may still be blamed for not *pursuing* virtue—which logically begins with pursuing knowledge of virtue—and it is how Laches and Nicias measure up to this responsibility that is the subject of the second half of the dialogue.

Second Half

I. Socrates sets the task: education in virtue (189c-190d)

(i) The inquiry turns to virtue (189c-190c)

The dialogue's center marks the fundamental turn of the dialogue, brought to a head by two men: Laches, who expressly abdicates his share of the command in favor of Socrates (189b); and Socrates, who makes use of this command to initiate a new beginning. As Socrates describes it, this new beginning is also a more fundamental beginning, thereby offering a reminder that that the earlier drama has largely been a product of two failed beginnings. The men first failed to assess the practice of fighting in armor, and subsequently failed to establish who are the teachers of caring for the soul. Implicit in Socrates' reform of the discussion is the promise of success where the men have hitherto failed.

Socrates' rise to commander of the discussion, and the simultaneous increase in more radical questioning and disagreement, is not a matter of chance. Socrates, by his own efforts, has increased his authority at the expense of Laches and Nicias. Moreover, Socrates has continually done so with the approval of the president of the discussion, Lysimachus. Socrates' growing success in persuading Lysimachus of the good of his advice is evident in the changing relationship between Socrates and Lysimachus. First, Lysimachus opens the dialogue with a lengthy speech concerning his reasons for forming the council, consisting of Nicias and Laches, only to add

Socrates as a councilor, chiefly on the advice of Laches. Lysimachus then proposes that Socrates choose between Nicias' and Laches' dissenting opinions on fighting in armor, only to have Socrates change the discussion to one that assesses teachers of caring for the soul. Lysimachus accepts Socrates' reformed agenda, and thus Socrates' request to solicit the opinions of Nicias and Laches, only to have the two generals speak about the qualities of Socrates, and only to have one of his advisors, Laches, expressly assign command to Socrates (189b). Finally, the "forgetful" Lysimachus relinquishes his presidency, delegating Socrates to speak in his place. Socrates' first words in the second half of the dialogue complete his acquisition of the presidency and his command of the discussion, as he ironically instructs Nicias and Laches that they, the three advisors, "must obey Lysimachus and Melesias" (189c), the two men seeking advice.

In founding this new discussion, Socrates significantly adds his belief "that an examination of the following sort would…lead to the same thing" as an assessment of teachers of the soul (189e). Consequently, it seems clear that Socrates believes he knows the answer to the question which they soon attempt to answer, or that Socrates is at least leading Nicias and Laches along the path he wishes them to travel. Socrates' apparent claim, that a thorough analysis of teachers and the products of their teaching leads to the same conclusion as an analysis of what virtue *is,* and how it can be made present in Lysimachus' and Melesias' sons, is of comprehensive significance. On the one hand, Socrates may be suggesting that a synthesis of the seemingly disparate parts of the *Laches*, the earlier "political half" and the later "philosophic half", may lead one to a knowledge of virtue greater than that contained

in the two parts. On the other hand, Socrates may also, or may only, be suggesting that the philosophic account necessarily arises from the practical account; thus, understanding why fame is or is not desirable in itself, or understanding teachers of caring for the soul, necessarily leads to an account of what virtue *is*. The account sought at this point would thus attempt to discover a more fundamental basis on which to ground the discussion, but would necessarily lead to the end of virtue, an end that would have been attained if the discussion in the first part of the dialogue were successful.

Socrates begins his new approach to the discussion with an abstract and questionable argument. Regarding "anything whatever", if we know X in Y makes Y better, and are able to make X present in Y, "we know this very thing concerning which we would be counselors as to how someone might obtain it in the easiest and best fashion" (189e). As Socrates presents it, however, the argument does not hold; being able to make something present in something else does not require that one necessarily knows the best and easiest way to make it present, nor does it necessarily require that one actually knows the thing that one is making present in its entirety. For instance, fighting in armor may educate a student in courage, but only marginally and with unnecessary labor. Yet, if one is only able to make courage present in this manner, in spite of better alternatives, one is making courage present, but not in the best and easiest fashion. The practice of fighting in armor would thus still fall prey to Laches' earlier criticism of Nicias' argument, that fighting in armor might be of some use, but it would not be of the best use (182e, 184b). This important standard of the easiest and best means of acquiring virtue, or anything else, serves as a reminder of

the finitude of human life; thus the need for true education to restrict itself to the best of studies.

The second problem, as stated, is that we often do know how to produce effects, without knowing the thing in question that produces such effects. The most evident reason for this productive ability is the ambiguity surrounding the thing that is to be obtained (X). In other words, knowing X in Y makes Y better does not necessarily entail that one knows that it is precisely the presence of X, in its totality, that makes Y better; only a part of X may be essential to the effect. For instance, knowing that limes prevent scurvy, and then making limes and thus health present in the patient, does not mean that one knows the *precise* thing that causes good health. Hence, knowing limes prevent scurvy does not lead to an immediate recognition that boiled twigs and leaves of cedars also prevent scurvy. In both cases, without recognizing the essential term, Vitamin C, one is still able to produce the desired effect. Socrates' ambiguity thus points to the important question regarding the relation between wholes and their parts, a question present throughout the second half of the dialogue.

In order to clarify the issue for Laches and Nicias, Socrates uses the example of sight and eyes. The example of sight points to two very different kinds of knowledge: experiential knowledge of "what sight is", and knowledge that is able to give an adequate account of how sight works. The *experience* of seeing, of course, is known by all but the blind. One need not possess an account of how sight works to experience sight, and the experience of sight does not entail an account of how sight works. Similarly, it is doubtful that an account of what sight is, and how sight works,

could ever explain to a blind man what sight is, in the sense of explaining to him what it is like to experience sight. That is to say, without the experience of sight, one cannot fully know what sight is. The two ways of knowing sight is applicable to two very different ways of knowing virtue: one may possess experiential knowledge of what courage is, as does Laches, or one may possess a rational account of what courage is. However, as with sight, to possess fully knowledge of "what courage is", one presumably must possess the prerequisite experiential knowledge of courage.

Rather than immediately clarifying his original abstract argument, however, Socrates' sight example points to additional problems concerning a conception of knowledge based on knowing only what we ourselves make. Knowing that sight makes eyes better does not necessarily mean that we know sight itself. To know sight itself, we must have the experience of sight, know how sight works, and know to what *end* sight is properly directed (cf. 185c). The problem is brought more to light by considering whether or not one is putting sight into eyes in the easiest and best fashion. That is because sight is a peculiar example insofar as it is a power that, strictly speaking, we *cannot* put into eyes. It is true that one may refine one's sight to better see commonalities and distinctions in color, order, scale, and the like. However, one must already naturally possess the power of sight in order to do so. In other words, one may only cultivate and assist a sight one already has, or, conversely, one may only corrupt or destroy a sight already present. Consequently, Socrates' example suggests that education is a refinement and cultivation of already present powers. This point is complicated by one of the peculiarities of the term "sight", namely that it refers to both our power of vision as well as the object of such powers;

one may catch sight of a beautiful sight. This linguistic point is a reminder that, when refining sight, both the subjective and objective sense of the term sight should be considered. Through reflection, man's subjective power of sight may be continually refined in reference to the world of objective sights, a refinement that allows one to see such sights better. One's virtue, Socrates seems to suggests, may be refined in light of the instantiations of virtue one sees in the world, by continually looking for men of virtue, a refinement that subsequently allows one to better comprehend men of virtue.

Socrates' reformulation of the example, that to be counselors regarding sight and hearing we must know what sight and what hearing is, adds the example of hearing seemingly without warning. Yet, although this second example apparently arises without any clear reason, it is important to recall that hearing is crucial regarding *logos*. Our capacity for reason, and thus for rationally deliberating with others in a display (including the display that opens the dialogue), is bound with our capacity for language. In this way, the power of hearing is intertwined with the philosophic reflection about sight. However, unlike sight, where one may privately reflect on a matter, hearing and understanding a spoken language is necessarily a social, hence potentially a political, act. The addition of hearing is crucial in terms of *education* in virtue, the ability of making X present in Y; practically speaking, to educate another in virtue, one must proceed at least partly through conversation. For someone like Laches, then, the sight of Socrates' martial virtue renders Laches willing to listen to him speak about it. His is a fairly typical attitude as to the relation of speech to deed.

With Laches' assent to Socrates' productive conception of knowledge, Socrates makes explicit what was earlier implicit (185c), namely that the current discussion is about virtue. In the process, Socrates reformulates Lysimachus and Melesias' request, stating that these two had summoned the counselors "to a consultation on the way in which virtue, through bring present in their sons, might make their souls better" (190b). It is hard to believe the two fathers had this in mind when they began the discussion. Just as Nicias warned, the discussion is moving, by Socrates' instigation, towards a questioning and revealing of the souls taking part in the discussion. The radical departure from the fathers' original wishes is even more apparent in the context of Laches' recent insinuation that there are virtuous men who do not necessarily gain a good reputation thereby (189b); it is possible that virtuous sons will not be honored, and thus will not provide their household with fame.

It is relevant in this regard that both Socrates and the dramatic movement to this point have emphasized the importance of productive knowledge. Although Socrates is not concerned with the question of acquiring fame, he is concerned with the practical importance of knowledge. Significantly, Socrates' ascent from questions of fame to questions of the soul implicitly relies on a distinction between knowledge and wisdom. Knowledge is considered important and desirable insofar as it facilitates one's production of something significant; one must therefore distinguish, as does Laches, between significant knowledge and useless or trivial knowledge (cf. 182e, 184b). Moreover, it is the inherent rank ordering of the good—that the reputation of courage is lesser than the possession of courage and that the possession of courage is lesser than the possession of virtue entire—that is implicitly behind Socrates'

questioning at the present point of the dialogue. Accordingly, Socrates' provides a new task for the discussion, "to know what virtue is" (190b). However, as stated, such knowledge is sought insofar as one believes that the acquisition of knowledge of virtue will lead to the acquisition of virtue itself; "for presumably if we did not at all know even what virtue happens to be, in what way would we be counselors of this for anyone, as to how he might obtain it in the finest manner" (190bc)? Consequently, the men's knowledge of "what virtue is" becomes the new starting point for the discussion, a knowledge that, at least according to Laches, entails the ability to state "what virtue is". Socrates' turn to the question of "what virtue is", assented to by Laches, directs the conversation to a number of epistemological, ontological, and psychological difficulties.

Socrates' question first implies an epistemological ascent, undergone by the turn from opinion to knowledge. The first half of the dialogue was predominantly Nicias' and Laches' opinions on fighting in armor, and Nicias' and Laches' opinions on Socrates the man. The dominance of opinion over knowledge was in large part a result of Lysimachus' superficial disposition towards political advice. Lysimachus did not foresee the competitive nature of the two generals, and did not foresee the potential problems inherent in soliciting advice in a semi-public forum. Accordingly, Nicias' and Laches' opinions on fighting in armor were presented through rhetorical speeches, with the intent to persuade rather than to learn. The second half of the dialogue, however, is now explicitly defined, by Socrates, as an attempt to gain knowledge about "what virtue is". To resolve the contradictory opinions on practices

and education, the dialogue turns to "what *is*", a turn that by necessity includes a new method for arriving at the truth.

Inherent in this turn to "what *is*", and the attempt to replace opinion with knowledge, is an implicit ontological turn. One investigates a Being that is prior to common experience, and that is prior to the everyday opinions and actions of political life; one seeks the prior principles that make political life possible. In other words, the epistemological turn is concurrently an ontological turn, as knowledge seeks the "what *is*" that is prior to the opinions about that which is coming into being. Thus, the new beginning that is underway is also an attempt to ascertain what is logically prior to one's experience; one attempts to grasp what is more fundamental both to reality and to one's experience of reality, an attempt that necessitates a turn to "what *is*". The ontological turn is fittingly discernible in the drama of the dialogue. Behind the men's impression of the display of fighting in armor is a number of beliefs and assumptions, including ones regarding what virtue is, making their experience of the display significant and influencing their interpretations of the display. The discussion to this point, one based on ordinary experience and ordinary language, has neither radically questioned the ground of the interlocutors' particular experiences, nor their opinions regarding virtue. Only with Socrates' turn does the possibility of grasping a more permanent reality arise, and thus only with Socrates' turn do the interlocutor's assumptions regarding reality truly come into question.

As evidenced by the lengthy drama that has thus far taken place, a turn to "what is" does not simply occur when the myriad world of opinions appear to be in contradiction with each other. One's psychological disposition must also be

sufficiently prepared for, and open to, a radical inquiry into the nature of virtue. As a result, the philosophic depths plumbed by the dialogue are intimately bound with the psyches of the interlocutors present; the psyches of Nicias and Laches dictate the nature of Socrates' inquiry, and the results of this inquiry. For this reason, it may be relevant that Socrates, by a small but important change in language, has altered what it means to know: obtaining something in the easiest and best manner has become obtaining it in the finest manner. Socrates' reformulation, from "easy and best" to "fine", invokes beauty or nobility as the ground of obtaining and assessing an education in virtue.

(ii) The inquiry is limited to courage (190c-190e)

Having emphasized the importance of knowing virtue, Socrates now limits the discussion to a part of virtue: courage. There are a number of reasons for the choice of courage as the part of virtue to be examined. The first is the explicit reason given by Socrates: to the many at least, courage is the virtue that "learning about armor seems to aim at" (190d). Of course, this is likely the reason Lysimachus and Melesias had considered fighting in armor in the first place; their desire for fame, for themselves and for their sons, naturally leads to a desire for the most publicly honored virtue. Moreover, the desire for courage is more generally consonant with masculine tone of the dialogue; courage is the virtue most naturally of interest to men. As a result, not only Lysimachus and Melesias, but also Laches and Nicias, will be more inclined to partake in the discussion. Finally, as evidenced by Laches' tacit

equation of virtue with manliness (188c), men are more likely to see courage or manliness (*andreia*) as the greatest portion of virtue.

In spite of the many reasons for specifically discussing courage, Socrates' reasons for limiting the discussion from virtue entire to only a part of virtue are far from compelling. The primary reason for a limited inquiry, according to Socrates, is that the work required to know virtue entire would be rather much, and that his way of proceeding would be easier. Socrates' phrasing has at least a pedagogic purpose, supplying a condition if one wishes to move from a inquiry limited to a part of virtue to an inquiry that attempts to know the whole of virtue, and thus supplying a standard by which to judge whether a student is capable of such an education. One must possess a love of labor, as the attempt to know virtue entire entails hard work. The process of limiting the discussion also signals Socrates' pedagogic wisdom. Rather than straightforwardly provide potential students with an account of virtue, Socrates cultivates the interlocutors' desire for a resolution to the problem. As a result of having them dedicate themselves to the question, and as a result of holding out the possibility of something more, Socrates is able to inculcate in the men an interest in a larger question that may have otherwise gone unconsidered. Laches' and Nicias' respective responses to Socratic education soon reveal their own dispositions to the question at hand.

Socrates' second explicit reason for this move is to test whether the men present are capable of knowing. The ability to test one's knowledge is of special importance because it tacitly points to a problem in all education, namely how one may assess one's education, and thus how one may determine that one is indeed being

educated, and not corrupted. In the first instance, knowing one has learned is and must be a matter of self-clarification. One cannot learn what learning is; one must already possess such knowledge to recognize when one has learned and to recognize when one has not learned. Socrates' suggestion, that this analysis of a part of virtue will give them the means to test whether or not they are capable of knowing, points to this problem with which Nicias and Laches must come to terms. It is incumbent upon Nicias and Laches to recognize what they have learned from the argument. The appearance of "fineness" at this point in the dialogue has accordingly not been incidental. Nicias and Laches, among other things, must judge the goodness of their own education in terms of its beauty or nobility, and thus based on their respective conceptions of the beautiful or the noble.

There is another noteworthy aspect of Socrates' claim; it may be those who stop short at this "knowledge" of the part, without knowledge of the whole, who reveal themselves to be incapable of pursuing knowledge. Understanding a part necessarily entails situating that part in reference to the whole of which it partakes. Conversely, knowledge of the parts that make up a whole is necessary for a comprehensive knowledge of the whole. Reflection on the process undergone to arrive at this problem, and on the implicit rationale behind Socrates' turn to courage—investigating a part of a greater whole—should lead Nicias and Laches to the recognition that they must continually refine their knowledge of the whole on the basis of what they know of the parts, and they must continually refine their knowledge of the parts on the basis of what they know of the whole. The process will test Nicias' and Laches' capacity for rational speech itself, since, in order to

recognize diversity in being, and thus to avoid reducing the world to meaningless homogeneity, and in order to recognize commonality in being, and thus to avoid reducing the world to chaotic heterogeneity, Nicias and Laches must be able to recognize a whole and its parts at one at the same time. The propriety of such an approach may be seen in reference to an earlier example; coming to know the nature of man is done by constantly refining one's knowledge of man in light of man's propensity for sight, and in light of the fact that man is himself a part of nature as such. Alternatively, coming to know human sight, or coming to know nature as such, must proceed in light of what one knows of human nature.

Laches does agree to Socrates' proposed examination of courage, perhaps in part because of Laches' confidence in his own experiential knowledge of courage, and perhaps as a manifestation of his actual courage—Laches, confident in his experiential knowledge, is *willing* to undergo Socratic inquiry. Laches' eagerness, however, prevents him from challenging Socrates on a crucial question: exactly how is courage a part of virtue? Later events in the dialogue prove this is not the straightforward question Laches presumes it is. Finally, it is worth mentioning that in the course of the reformation of the discussion, the previously implicit association between Laches and Socrates is made more explicit. Socrates first praises Laches, and directs the conversation in his direction. Moreover, not only is Laches among the "best [of men]" (190c), Socrates continues to address Laches repeatedly by name (190be), and makes clear references to a partnership between Laches and himself, such as using the terms "us" and "we" (190b-191a). Of course, this is likely in part due to Laches' willingness to join the conversation, a willingness Nicias apparently

lacked. This effort by Socrates to ally himself with Laches more closely, in the first of the more difficult and abstract discussions of virtue, is clearly occasioned by Socrates' opinion of Laches' nature. The present inquiry will try the strength of this alliance.

II. Laches' attempts to define courage (190e-193d)

(i) The steadfast soldier (190e-192c)

Laches straightforwardly responds to Socrates' question of what courage *is*, a response that underlines that Laches is more a man of deeds than of speech:

> By Zeus, Socrates, it is not hard to state [what courage is]. For if someone should be willing to remain in the ranks and defend himself against the enemies and should not flee, know well that he would be courageous.[35] (190e)

The frank simplicity of this response, being not a formal definition but rather an example of courage, verifies Laches' earlier claim that Laches is unacquainted with Socrates' speeches (188e). Moreover, his unsophisticated reply is consonant with his virtue as an honest man, and recalls the traditional correlation between manliness and honesty. The honest man, who lives in the midst of the traditionally masculine realm of political life, wishes to display plainly who he is; he wishes to display an honest face to the world. Such men, therefore, tend to be impatient of subtle or abstruse matters, and suspicious of those who speak about them (cf. 197d). Although at first glance Laches' simple honesty appears to be a philosophic limitation, as evidenced by his unrefined attempt to define courage, one must also remember that a genuine assessment of oneself, including one's own courage and one's own virtue, requires a hard honesty of which most men are not capable. One must not forget the honest side of Socrates' ironic speech.

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[35] For an excellent discussion of Laches' definition and Socrates' response, cf. Montaigne, "Of Constancy", in *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, trans. Donald Frame (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1958), 30-31.

Before examining the substance of Laches' definition, it is worth reflecting on his prefatory claim that it "is not hard to state" what courage is (190e). Laches previously made a similar assertion regarding virtue: since he knows what virtue is, he is confident he can state what it is (190c). In so averring, Laches implicitly asserts that rational speech is able to convey the truth of reality, a task that Laches clearly believes is relatively uncomplicated. In this way, Laches' replies, whether he is cognizant of it or not, rely on an entirely rationalistic view of reality, in that reality permits itself of being explained through rational speech. Laches' trust in speech has been implied earlier in his harmony principle—the highest life, lived by the man of great deeds, is harmony between deed *and* speech, not deed itself. For this reason, Laches makes an ideal interlocutor for Socrates, as he does not question the fundamental good of rational argument. Although Laches has shown a distrust of those who use speech to deceive or boast, his distrust does not extend to rational argument itself; he sees no ground for action that is not, in essence, defensible in speech. Laches' earlier account of speech also provides a deeper rationale for Socrates' query, having Laches test the adequacy of his own earlier standard of speech. If Laches is to be successful, he must define "what courage is" in reference to empirical reality, and without reference to intelligible realities that are not visible. As a result, Laches' ability to give an account is in question in two ways: his ability to give an account of courage, and his ability to give an account of reality.

As expected, the content of Laches' definition of courage centers on his practical experience of it in himself and others. There are four main constituents to Laches' definition: the will; remaining in the ranks; defense against enemies; and not

fleeing. First, one must be *willing* to do battle. The courageous man is not forced to do a courageous act, but does so by his own volition. It is a crucial point, one that is frequently revisited in the remainder of the dialogue. Second, one must remain in the ranks. Laches' point here is primarily in contradistinction to those who flee, but also calls to mind the romantic Homeric conception of the warrior who, as a result of his powerful drive for personal glory, rushes ahead of the ranks to try his hand in individual combat. He thereby recalls, and implicitly criticizes, Nicias' earlier arguments concerning fighting in armor, which stressed its usefulness in combat after the ranks are broken. Third, one must defend oneself against enemies. Conflict is thus included in his definition, where victory is clearly defined as an overcoming of one's enemies. Although in the immediate sense Laches' definition is in reference to the enemy of one's polity, it is amenable to a broader definition of war. Taken together with Laches' public spiritedness, as evidenced in the second part of the definition, Laches reveals his willingness to go to war against enemies for the sake of friends and allies. Fourth and finally, Laches implies that flight is necessarily cowardly. The opposition between cowardly flight and courageous steadfastness becomes the center of Socrates' criticisms.[36] That is also to say that Socrates does not call into question Laches' emphasis on the will, on war, and on public spiritedness. All three qualities are essential to Laches' own courage and to why Socrates accepts the alliance initiated by Laches.

Despite its inadequacies as a formal definition of courage, it is worth observing that Socrates twice commends Laches' speech. Although it is clear that

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[36] For a discussion of the importance of this point to the dialogue at large, cf. Anas Walid Muwais' aptly named, *Socrates – Counselor of Phobos: A Commentary on Plato's Laches* (Edmonton, Alberta: University of Alberta, 1999), especially 80.

Socrates is deflecting the blame for the shortcomings of Laches' responses away from Laches (suggesting instead that his question was ambiguous), apparently so Laches is not offended or embarrassed, Socrates' emphasis also makes clear that he believes the man who willingly holds the ranks is a courageous man. Socrates confirms this not only by his speeches, but also by his past deeds (181ab). Part of the reason why Laches' definition is a good one is that it points to a near universal example of a courageous man. If one believes that holding one's ground in the ranks is noble (which implies a belief in the noble itself), as the public spirited Laches clearly does, having the courage to carry out one's belief is an inherently good quality of soul. Therefore, inherent in Laches' example is the formal definition of courage as a quality of soul that allows one to carry through with what one opines to be the good, including all the psychic strength that this entails. However, Laches, still unfamiliar with Socrates' speeches, is not yet prepared to forward such formal definitions; Socrates must lead him to this task.

Unlike Laches' account of courage, an account one might expect from any experienced military commander, Socrates' counter-examples are comparatively unconventional subjects of martial practice. In contradistinction to the more conventional expectation of men fighting in the ranks, emphasized throughout Laches' definition, Socrates uses four types of fleeing to demonstrate that flight may be a courageous action. That Socrates is able to educate the accomplished general in martial affairs is itself striking, and thus Socrates' pedagogic strategy is of special note. Socrates' first example is the Scythians' horsemen, those who fight "no less while fleeing than while pursuing" (191a). It is curious, however, that this example

does not seem directly to contradict Laches' claim that *holding the ranks* is courageous. The example is only effective because "fleeing" by chariot or by horseback may be courageous in a way that fleeing from the ranks is not; chariots and horsemen strategically retreat by horseback, so they may soon re-organize and re-engage an enemy. This is in complete contrast to hoplite warfare, where the individual who throws aside his shield and flees also throws aside his responsibility, common to all hoplites, for maintaining the hoplite ranks. As a result of broadening Laches' definition, Socrates teaches Laches at least one thing worthy of note. In forming his definition, Laches must now consider military formations that are beneficial and require courage, but that do not adhere to the same rules or forms as hoplite warfare. In doing so, Laches must also account for what is common, courage, amongst two otherwise disparate military examples, thereby moving from his example of courage to a more formal definition that will encompass the examples Socrates cites, and which Laches agrees are relevant.

In addition, Socrates attempts to clarify for Laches the propriety of Laches' dependence on a Greco-centric position. That Socrates chooses the Scythians as an example is surprising, considering their distance from the Greek ideal, and considering the dominance of Greek armies at the time. Moreover, Socrates soon reveals he is quite capable of making his central point without this reference, as he uses the Spartans instead. Therefore, one is compelled to consider why Socrates has chosen the Scythians as his first example. Socrates' intimation is that one cannot ground the Greek-barbarian distinction solely in military affairs, where the barbarians may offer, at times, martial instruction. If one believes that the Spartans and the

Greeks are superior to the barbarians, and even superior to the barbarians in courage, as Laches and any free Greek man clearly would, one must look for a standard to ground this belief more reliable than martial superiority. Socrates will soon point to a more solid basis for this distinction.

Socrates' second and third examples, underlining many of the points encountered in the example of the Scythians, are Homer's praise of Aeneas' horses and Homer's praise of Aeneas himself. Socrates' use of Homer, a central figure of Greek culture, to remind Laches of barbarian military practices, likely makes what is essentially the same advice encountered with the Scythians more palatable to Laches. Through his use of Homer and thus a poet to teach Laches, Socrates facilitates a second education with this example; Socrates implies that Laches would benefit from reflection on poetry, which in turn requires a greater respect for the possible wisdom of poets. Consequently, one may learn martial wisdom from semi-mythic Trojans, told of not by a general but by a poet. That this advice is in military matters, where Laches is renowned as an expert, makes the pedagogic process, and the power of the poet, all the more forceful. Although Laches may at this point be only dimly aware of Socrates' ability in speech, this education in poetry also points to Socrates' own counseling of the general on military affairs.

One of the Homeric passages in question, as Socrates is surely aware, also draws the courage of flight into question, including flight by chariot, as exemplified by the Scythians. Most notably, by referring to Aeneas' horses, Socrates recalls the confrontation between Aeneas and Diomedes, where Aeneas' horses play perhaps their most prominent role in the *Iliad*. In this confrontation, Diomedes refuses to flee

by chariot, as Pandaros and Aeneas simultaneously bear down on him; Diomedes, for whom "it would be ignoble…to shrink back in the fighting / or to lurk aside, since [his] fighting strength stays steady forever",[37] slays Pandaros. Aeneas, injured at Diomedes hand, escapes only due to the successful intervention of Aphrodite, a goddess, who is in turn struck by the bold Diomedes "who would fight now even against Zeus' father".[38] Considered in context, the allusion to the successful and steadfast Diomedes is hardly an endorsement of flight. Indeed, it is rather congruent with Laches' own view. On the other hand, the courage of flight is more plausible in another act of Diomedes, also alluded to by Socrates. Diomedes, on the advice of Nestor and an apparent portent from Zeus, flees from Hector.[39] In spite of Diomedes seemingly prudent action, however, he implicitly impugns his own actions by the shame he feels, and only turns away from battle due to the thunder of Zeus, a divine act summoned no less than four times.[40] Moreover, Socrates' use of Homer to claim Aeneas is a counselor of flight is questionable. Socrates changes Homer's meaning, that Aeneas inspires fright in his enemies,[41] to claim that Aeneas possesses "a knowledge of flight" (191b). One may ask again, what exactly is courageous in flight?

Socrates' use of horses and a charioteer to refine Laches' definition also reveals a key facet of courage. Aeneas' warhorses are implicitly deemed "courageous", bold, or fearless because they are obedient to commands, regardless of

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[37] Homer. *The Iliad of Homer*. trans., Richmond Lattimore (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1951), 5.253-254.
[38] Ibid., 5.362.
[39] Ibid., 8.99-8.171.
[40] Ibid., 8.132-8.136, 8.170-171.
[41] Ibid., 5.272, 8.108.

the dangers of war (cf. 196e). It is noteworthy regarding the prominence of education in the dialogue that the development of a horse's boldness, implicitly referred to in the earlier example of the bridle, is dependent both on a rigorous training regimen, and on the proper pedigree of the horse. Unlike the charioteer, however, the horses are not the source of their commands, nor do they seem *self*-conscious of the danger that threatens them. Instead, the horses are "ordered", by years of training and experience, and by the charioteer's whip and bridle, to obey steadfastly despite their natural instincts. Diomedes' self-conscious decision to remain steadfast is thus not a *decision* that the horses make. In contrast, Diomedes' decision is of great import, as it is a reminder of the divide in his soul, a divide between his opinion of the best course of action, and the fears that prompt him to act contrary to his beliefs as to what is noble. It is Diomedes' courage, grounded in his rational and spirited assessment of the good life, that wins him Aeneas' horses.

Laches' response to Socrates' counter-examples centers on what seemed clear at the outset, namely that he was referring to Greek hoplites. It is the only mention of Greeks in the text, and distinguishes the Greeks from the barbarians based on their ability to combine the requisite courage and military skill requisite to hoplite warfare. Laches' emphasis on Greek hoplite warfare marks an essential contrast with Nicias' earlier arguments on the advantages of fighting in armor, where Nicias spoke so favorably of horsemanship (182a). Laches still wishes to hold to the traditional Greek, and specifically Spartan, ideal. Horses are a leisurely pursuit; true Greeks fight in the hoplite ranks.

On the surface, Socrates' fourth example, occasioned by Laches, captures the Greek admiration of hoplite warfare, typified by Laches' preference for the Greek over the barbarian. Socrates uses Laches' ideal of martial excellence, the Lacedaemonians, to indicate that even hoplites fight courageously in flight. The Spartan example is a reminder of the distinctive character of Greek warfare, and its manifold superiority to barbarous forms of warfare. In an ideal hoplite formation, men remain in the ranks, protecting the welfare of both themselves and the army as a whole, thereby creating a power greater than the aggregate power of the same soldiers acting in isolation. Underpinning such a formation is the willingness of individual soldiers to fight for their comrades as well as themselves, a willingness that requires a strong belief that the army as a whole is better off if each man fulfills his specific task, and that this shared good of the army is one's own good. In this way, the cultural superiority of the Greeks, one that includes a shared belief in a common political good, is, in large measure, the source of their martial superiority. Laches' admiration of hoplite warfare thus springs from the same source as his admiration of the Spartans as a whole, namely their powerful public spirit. Laches' admiration is not for military courage simply, but for political courage itself, a courage that subsumes military courage.

The problem, however, is that Socrates' example does not truly describe the Spartans conduct at Plataea at all. As Walter Schmid notes, Socrates seems to substitute the famous Spartan stand of Thermopylae, where the Spartans and her allies successfully used such tactics of retreat, for the battle of Plataea.[42] Socrates' move is particularly surprising, considering the stand of 300 Spartiates in the pass of

[42] Schmid, 104-105.

Thermopylae, willingly going to their death for the sake of Sparta and the manly ideal, is likely exactly what Laches has in mind when he formulates his definition.

So, why Plataea? The men present would surely be aware of the events at Plataea: the generals Laches and Nicias because they would be familiar with military history, and Lysimachus and Melesias because Aristeides, Lysimachus' father, was general of the Athenian forces.[43] According to Herodotus' retelling, the example of Plataea has a number of lessons to teach. Most relevant in the present case, however, is Herodotus' account of the stubborn Amompharetus, who disobeys orders, leading to disarray in the army.[44] Amompharetus' pernicious steadfastness points to the possible tension between standing one's ground and obeying one's commander, a tension that almost resulted in defeat for the Spartans; only superior armor, skill, and cunning saved the Greeks from the Persians.[45] The comical affair at Plataea makes clear that the steadfast soldier must often defer to questionable commands to be good. Steadfastness causing one to disobey the orders of a higher ranking officer, to the detriment of the army as a whole, is not a sign of a courageous man, but rather indicative of a foolish and stubborn one. A second relevant point revealed by the battle of Plataea is pointed to by the conduct of the Spartan commander Pausanias. Pausanias, as Herodotus describes, lacked the willingness to confront the Persians, evidenced by his heavy reliance on the Athenians, and his doing battle only at the convenience of the Persians.[46] The behavior of Pausanias is a reminder that *unwillingly* doing battle is not a courageous action.

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[43] Herodotus, *The History*, trans. David Grene (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), 9.28.
[44] Ibid 9.53-9.57.
[45] Ibid 9.62.
[46] Ibid 9.46-9.61.

Socrates, having ironically indicated the strengths and weaknesses of Laches' definition, and having better acquainted Laches with dialogic inquiry, now leads Laches to provide an account that applies to all instances of courage. To ask this rather straightforward question, Socrates uses four different sets of examples. The four sets are roughly grouped as courage in war, courage in dangers at sea, courage in politics, and courage in fighting against pleasures and desires. All four shed light on the nature of courage, and broaden the conception of courage to include examples that do not occur in the context of military battles. The rough movement of the examples is from a consideration of the public manifestations of courage to a consideration of the courage involved in the successful rule of one's soul.

The first, courage in war, includes courage in heavy-armed soldiery and cavalry, and "every form of warfare" (191d). It is distinctive in relation to the other examples, as courage in war is the only set that naturally follows from the preceding discussion. It is also the only instance of *eidos* in the text. The examples ostensibly refer back to the discussion of martial courage we have just witnessed, expanded to include all forms of warfare. Although Socrates clearly has other conventionally martial examples in mind, the prevalence of martial language used in the following non-martial situations, such as speaking of fighting and retreating in regard to desires or pleasures, recalls the fact that warfare can be used as a far more inclusive term than one initially conceives. The import of the broader relation between courage and warfare, and its relevance in this opening instance, soon becomes evident.

The second "set" is distinct in that Socrates provides only one example, namely "those who are courageous in dangers at sea" (191d). Part of the motivation

for this example seems to be the nature of dangers at sea. Unlike the martial and political examples, where the loss of a battle or civil turmoil affects some and not others, the inability of a ship to meet sufficiently a danger at sea because of cowardice or bad command means that the entire ship will sink, with all men on board. Due to this pressing fact, a pilot and his sailors should be more willing to act courageously and in common in the face of danger, as compared to soldiers on land. Significantly, then, the example of the ship in peril refers to an attitude that may be politically salutary for an army or a polity to believe: if the army loses, or civil strife occurs, *all* may perish. Indeed, this unity may be the essence of the political community, insofar as it represents a good shared by all its members. Although the virtue of an individual may be a concern over and above the good of the ship as a whole, such virtue can only be cultivated if the ship is still afloat.

The third set groups three seemingly disparate examples together, pointing to courage "toward sickness and poverty or even toward politics" (191d). On the surface, Socrates seems to be pointing to the courage involved in enduring or overcoming sickness, poverty, and the hardships of political life. The mention of sickness continues the development of an important theme throughout the text, health. The courage involved in relation to sickness is seen in a superficial sense when one remembers that we often speak of those who undergo medical treatment as courageous, despite the obvious fact that treatment is best for them. Knowing what is best for oneself, and having the qualities of soul actually to act on what is best for oneself, are two radically different things. The mention of poverty should also have us ask what acting courageously toward poverty entails. The men present are, of

course, confronted with Socrates the man, barefoot and all. Certainly, he seems to have confronted his own financial poverty with courage. Socrates is thus a reminder that only if one loves money, or loves the goods that money may buy, is one distressed by its absence. The third example, the inclusion of politics, strikes a discordant note with our usual inclination to see political life as a means of securing our own good. As a result of including courage with respect to politics, Socrates implicitly points to the courage needed to seek the good in a potentially antagonistic political realm. Since such a good may be hard to obtain or preserve, one requires strength of soul to be virtuous in politics.[47] Indeed, courage toward sickness or poverty is often needed precisely because one must perform a duty that entails hardship or danger. The need for courage in relation to sickness, poverty, and politics, and the relation of sickness and poverty to civic duty, are all better seen in relation to weaknesses of the historical Nicias: his inability either to fulfill or forcefully relinquish his command in the face of sickness;[48] the questionable acquisition and the alleged questionable use of his wealth;[49] and his failure to oppose wholeheartedly the Sicilian campaign or admit defeat when the campaign had clearly been lost.[50] The relevance of these implied charges, and of Plato's tragicomic treatment of Nicias, will be brought more to light when Nicias reenters the discussion.

The final set of examples concerns "not only those who are courageous toward pains or fears but also those who are clever at fighting against desires or

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[47] One may consider Socrates' account of his own courageous stand, regarding the affair of the ten generals: "although the orators were ready to indict me and arrest me, and you [the Athenians] were ordering and shouting, I supposed that I should run the risk with the law and the just rather than side with you because of fear of prison or death when you were counseling unjust things" (*Apology*, 32bc).
[48] Thucydides, 6.102.2, 7.15.1; Kagan, *Peace of Nicias*, 281-2.
[49] Plutarch, 4, 10.
[50] Thucydides, 6.8.3-6.14, 6.19.2-6.25, 7.10-7.15; *Peace of Nicias*, 174-180, 186-191, 277-282.

pleasures, whether remaining or turning around in retreat" (191de). Socrates thus defines courage as something that acts in relation to, and potentially in conflict with, inclinations of the soul, supplying a four-part taxonomy in relation to courage, referring not only to pains and fears, but to desires and pleasures as well. The mention of desire and pleasure in relation to courage is perhaps most striking, as it seems as though Socrates has expanded courage to include moderation. However, one must recall that courage literally means manliness in the Greek (*andreia*), and thus Socrates is able to extend the argument to the self-control required to rule over the appetites.

First, there are those who are courageous toward pain. Courage toward pain is presumably to act in light of higher standards despite the physical pain one must endure, the pain of warfare being a clear example. Second, there are those who are courageous toward fear. In this case, courageous men willingly suffer the danger of a perceived *future* evil, such as death, for another good, such as the noble. The enduring of a constant fear of death in warfare is a clear example. Socrates third and fourth divisions, it should be noted, include important subdivisions, that being the possibility of courageously "remaining or turning around in retreat" from desires or pleasures. These subdivisions were presumably not needed in reference to pain or fear, since retreating from pains or fears is, depending on the situation, an example of either prudence or cowardice, but not courage. Consequently, the third division is those who are courageous by "remaining" in certain desires, or by "turning around in retreat" from certain desires. In the first case, the desire for hard things, such as noble conduct in war, may be what Socrates has in mind. In other words, to continually

desire to be noble, one not only requires the desire for nobility, but the courage to retain one's desire in the face of hardship and contrary inclinations. In the second case, there are those who are courageous in turning around in retreat from desires. That is, when confronted with desires that are bad for oneself, it takes courage to retreat from them, rather than embrace them and their objects freely for the sake of pleasure. For instance, one should courageously retreat from Paris-like desires, ones that give preference to sex over the noble. Fourth, there are those who are courageous by "remaining" in certain pleasures, or by "turning around in retreat" from certain pleasures. In the first case, the implication is that some pleasures are not sustained simply by virtue of their pleasantness, but require courage to be continually enjoyed. Perhaps the pleasantness of the philosophic life serves as an example of a pleasure that requires courage to be sustained. In the second case, Socrates implies that pleasure is not simply good, and that one should, at times, decide against an activity even while pleasantly enjoying it. For instance, although one may find indulging in gluttony, spite, or malice pleasant, one should still retreat from such actions.

Common in all four or six dispositions is the need for a certain strength of soul, one that combines a rational assessment of the good with a willingness to act according to this assessment. There are also subgroups that connect some of these instances of courage with each other. Courage toward pain is similar to courage toward the pleasurable, including either courage towards "suffering" a privation of pleasure, and courage towards remaining in what is pleasurable. Common in such actions is the willingness to pursue a higher standard of action, over and above the

impetuses of immediate pain and pleasure. Although in one sense courage in reference to pain and pleasure is similar, one must note an important asymmetry. It is rarely, if ever, the case that one excuses a cowardly act due to the intensity of desire or pleasure. Conversely, to act cowardly as a result of severe pain or fear is almost universally seen as less ignoble than acting cowardly simply. Accordingly, a soldier who gives military information due to torture, or the child who lashes out due to abuse, are generally objects of compassion rather than condemnation. In contrast, a man like Paris, who shirks military duty to pursue pleasure, is despised even more because of his failure to master desire. There is also a similarity between those who courageously retreat from desires, and thus forsake their bad desired object, and those who courageously remain in desires, and thus continually do battle for their good desired object. For instance, the continent soldier who retreats from his bodily desires is, in one sense, akin to the man who continually desires virtue; common throughout is a courageous disposition towards the future, including a forethoughtful assessment of the future. The significance of the presence of fear and forethought in understanding courage soon becomes more prominent, in Socrates' and Laches' questioning of Nicias.

Socrates' final division also suggests that courage is not the result of courageous pains, pleasures, desires, or fears, inclinations possessed by the spirited Laches. Socrates teaches that one must also be *clever* to outwit and to tyrannize irresponsible desires and pleasures, an intellectual ability we may at least suspect that the honest and simple Laches does not possess. In this way, Socrates also provides a preliminary sketch of a divided, and hierarchically ranked, soul; one may sometimes

rightly describe it as a soul at war with itself, when, for instance, desire and reason conflict. Socrates description is presumably pedagogically effective for the general Laches, a man who is now able to see the courage required to win the pitched battles that occur in the human soul.

With the benefit of hindsight, we may also note that Plato's first use of the term courage is more significant than it first appeared; understanding courage is in large measure understanding the human soul as a divided soul, so that Nicias may intelligibly speak of the possibility of being "more courageous than oneself" (182c).[51] In this preliminary portrait of a divided soul, readers of the *Republic* may recognize a familiar theme: courage is seated in the spirited part of the soul, but this spirited part of the soul must be successfully allied to reason in order to overcome the appetitive part of the soul. However, like the earlier comparison of the *Laches* with the *Symposium*, such a comparison should also have us note the peculiarities of the account of the soul found in the *Laches*. Most importantly, reason's role in the human soul lacks the prominence and fullness that would be familiar to readers of the *Republic*. Here the difference is seen by Socrates' use of "terribly clever" (*deinos*) to denote the rational part of the soul, a point in contrast, both in scope and in substance, to the extensive treatment of the rational part of the soul that one finds in the *Republic*. The limitation is consonant with the dialogue's theme, manliness or courage.

Laches assents to Socrates description of courage, likely with the idea of the manly soldier in mind. To know the pleasures of martial campaigns, and to pursue one's desire for a noble life, the soldier must courageously endure pains or fears, and

[51] Compare *Republic* 403eb.

must be willing courageously to forsake the more superficial desires and pleasures of life. Following Laches' strong approval of this inclusive description of courage, Socrates echoes the four-part division of courage outlined above, without the six-part variation. According to Socrates, "some possess courage in pleasures, some in pains, some in desires, and some in fears, and others, I think, possess cowardice in these same things" (191e).

Having introduced a more inclusive description of courage, Socrates is again ready to ask for its formal definition. His solicitation of Laches' answer is accompanied by two strange remarks. Although he asks "*first* about courage" (191e, emphasis added), he does not state what they should discuss next. The relation of courage to virtue certainly seems important, given the earlier step of turning to courage as a part of virtue without explaining in what way it is a part of virtue. Consequently, that we never resolve the relation of courage to wisdom may be a reminder of what one needs for a complete account of courage. It is thus worth noting in advance that Socrates returns to this question of the relation of courage to virtue, in his discussion with Nicias (198a). Socrates' second curious remark is to ask again if Laches understands. On the face of it, Socrates is simply giving Laches a reasonable chance to ask for clarification, without shame, while Plato is cueing the reader to reflect on why Laches may not understand. The need for Socrates' step seems to be proven by Laches' reply, who admits he does "not altogether" understand what Socrates means (191e). However, Socrates' question, which suggests that he

recognizes Laches' sluggish ability to comprehend dialogic investigation, should also have us ask why Socrates proceeds in the manner he does.

Socrates first compares the question of "what courage is" to the question of

> ...what speed is, which happens to exist for us in running and playing the cithara and speaking and learning and many other things, and we possess it—where it is worth speaking about—pretty much in the actions of hands or legs or mouth and voice or thought. (192a)

There are obvious links between Socrates' choices of examples: running is a distinctly gymnastic example, while playing the cithara is a distinctly musical activity; speaking is a distinctly political activity, whereas learning is a distinctly private activity. These four activities, in turn, correspond to the five actions that Socrates lists. The cithara is played with the hands, running achieved with the legs, and learning is undertaken by means of thought. The double example of "mouth *and* voice", however, alerts us to the distinctive character of human speech. Language is not simply reducible to the physical movements of the mouth, but is also dependent on reason. Human speech is an interplay between the political and the private, between the body and the soul, insofar as it requires both human language and human reason as a condition for its use. Giving voice to something is more than uttering sounds, it is uttering sounds that are *intelligible* only by reference to rational ideas. In this fundamental sense, learning and human thought require that the student already possess the capacity for rational speech.

The significance of this aspect of education is brought more to light as Socrates adds that he would "call swiftness the power of accomplishing many things in a short time, in respect of voice and running and all other things" (192ab). Socrates now limits his two examples to voice and running. These two changes in

Socrates' definition point the reader to the importance of the swiftness example, and the importance of the current plodding pace of the drama. First, Socrates has reintroduced what is principally at issue in the dialogue, namely the *education* of courage. His initial signposts to the complexity involved in human learning, an activity that bespeaks our finite natures, points to the importance of swiftness in human affairs. Human life is limited, and thus education is not simply a matter of learning, but of learning both well and expeditiously. Although education may require one to proceed slowly, as in the need to digest certain truths, one also benefits the most if one is able to undergo this process as swiftly as possible. In light of this, Socrates points to running and voice as two complementary examples. While running, one wishes to finish the race as quickly as possible (i.e. swiftly). In the present example, this means acquiring or continually realizing the heights of courage as soon as possible. However, as in speech, there is a natural standard which dictates the speed at which one should proceed, and thus "swiftness" in speech is not necessarily a virtue. It is only when one gives voice according to the proper form or tempo that one speaks well. Socrates' question to Laches, whether or not he understands, is an instance of this pedagogic necessity, as Socrates may educate Laches only as swiftly as Laches is able to learn.

Socrates' reformulation of the question at this point further narrows the conception of courage. Courage, now defined as a power, is explicitly linked by Socrates to matters of pleasures and pain, while the manifold situations that require courage and do not seem to concern pleasure or pain are relegated to a side note of "all those things" (192b). As pointed to earlier, Socrates' examples have hinted that

courage toward pleasures or pains itself rests on a distinction between courage and pleasure. Even if one asserts that it takes courage to pursue pleasure shamelessly, this virtue of courage cannot be reduced to pleasure or to the desire for pleasure. If pleasure were the sole motivating factor of courage, one would only have to know which course of action would be most pleasant in order to pursue it. A rational utilitarian calculus would be sufficient for pursuing the most pleasant life. Yet, it is clearly not; we are not thoroughly hedonistic beings, and thus need virtues such as courage to act on what our reason dictates, even dictates concerning pleasure and pain. That we distinguish the idea of courage from pleasure and our rational assessment of the pleasurable is a reminder of this need for spirited courage while retreating from, or remaining in, pleasures.

(ii) Courage as steadfastness (192b – 194c)

As a result of Socrates' prompting, Laches now provides his second definition of courage, that "it is a certain steadfastness of the soul, if one must say about courage what is by nature in all cases" (192bc). As has largely been evidenced in Laches' previous replies, he is most impressed by the ability of the courageous man's soul to endure harsh realities. For Laches, the one who exemplifies courage, as such, is the traditional and manly soldier, conducting himself well and nobly on campaign, and willingly fighting for his comrades against their common enemies. Nature provides this standard of courage, not human artifice, and thus men are courageous insofar as they live in accord with nature.

Although he may be only dimly aware of it, Laches' definition is also implicitly dependent on a conception of courage that acts in opposition to the world, including both the external world and the lower parts of one's own nature.[52] One needs steadfastness of soul, dictated by nature, because human nature as a whole is only qualifiedly good. Laches' definition recognizes that the human soul, as a soul in nature, realizes the heights of nature only through the exercise of the soul's virtues. Human excellence is not *simply* given by nature, but itself requires human steadfastness to actively realize human nature. Human nature is itself a height of nature, and, through cultivation, human nature can reach the heights nature prescribes. Consequently, one willingly remains in the ranks to fight one's enemies, since one realizes the good of nature only by doing battle for nature.

Socrates' reply to Laches' account begins with an appeal to Laches' judgment that courage is an altogether noble thing. The appeal to nobility is of great consequence. If courage is *naturally* altogether noble, it consequently can serve as the criterion by which one judges which pleasures and pains to embrace and which to resist. The argument that another way of life is more pleasant is thus superceded by the more important question of whether or not that way of life is more noble; no amount of pleasure redeems the life that is naturally base. That courage is *altogether* noble is important insofar as only unequivocal nobility could be appealed to without qualification. If courage is partly noble, one needs a standard in light of which one judges when and where courage is noble.

Laches' belief in the unqualified nobility of courage becomes all the more important when one considers Socrates' later words. In response to Laches'

[52] For a contrasting discussion on Laches' use of the soul and nature, cf. Blitz, 214.

agreement, that courage is among the noblest of things, Socrates apparently qualifies steadfastness, by appealing to the ground of the noble. Steadfastness "accompanied by prudence", at least according to Laches' affirmative response to Socrates' question, is "noble and good" (192c). Notice, Socrates adds not one, but two things, with his amendment. First, Laches is agreeing to a conception of courage that is necessarily prudent. As we soon see, one should at least question whether this coheres with our experience. The second addition is the qualification that prudence, in relation to courage, is both noble and good. Although this locution refers to a singular idea in the Greek—the gentleman is both "noble and good"—the shift in language should remind us that conventional wisdom does not deem all things that seem good as noble, and does not deem all things that seem noble as good. Punishment of a thief may be good, but that does not necessarily make it noble. Conversely, the transgression of the law to avenge one's murdered son may be noble, but it is not necessarily good.

Based on the additional requirement of prudence, Socrates has Laches agree that steadfastness accompanied by folly is harmful and evildoing. Harm potentially (although not necessarily) matches up with a utilitarian notion of the good, but the inclusion of evildoing clearly suggests a ground that is greater than utility or pleasure. The importance of the inclusion of evildoing will be more apparent later in the dialogue. Socrates asks whether or not something evildoing and harmful is something noble. Again, the "and" here needs to be emphasized, as we may very well want to say that steadfastness can be harmful, at least to other people. It may not be evil to kill one's enemy in battle, but one certainly is doing them harm. Laches

complicates the matter further by answering, in response to the question of whether or not steadfastness accompanied by folly would be noble, that it certainly would not be *just*.

Since injustice is presumably ignoble, Socrates is able to state that Laches will "therefore not agree that steadfastness [which is evildoing and harmful]…is courage, since it is not noble, and courage is a noble thing" (192d). However, as in the case of the good and the noble, Socrates' implicit suggestion that injustice is ignoble should have us recall that ordinary opinion often asserts that there is a conflict between nobility and justice. Ordinary opinion often asserts that certain things are just, yet not noble, and often asserts that certain things are noble, yet not just. For instance, one can claim that the spy or the public executioners are just men, but that does not necessarily make them noble men as well. In contrast, one can claim that Achilles or a grieved father who takes the "law into his own hands", are noble men, but that does not necessarily make them just men. If, in the final analysis, nobility, justice, and goodness do come together in a harmonious synthesis, it is not immediately obvious.

Socrates now is able to state, that since only prudent steadfastness is noble, then "prudent steadfastness…would be courage, according to Laches' argument" (192d). Although Laches' original definition of steadfastness has been shown problematic, Socrates continues to assert that at least a certain type of steadfastness is courage. Socrates now attempts to further define exactly what type of prudence is required for courage. More particularly, he asks the nature of prudent steadfastness in terms of its scale. Do we reserve the title courage for great matters, or can one be courageous in small matters as well? The apparently self-evident nature of this

question, as indicated by the oath included in Laches' reply, seems to make clear that we reserve terms of virtue for great matters. This is immediately recognizable when we recall that virtue may often be rendered best as human excellence. This assessment of prudent steadfastness is important not only in terms of distinguishing matters of virtue, but also in terms of attempting an education. Assessing a study, as has been seen, necessarily entails a prudential judgment on the importance of the study, and the importance of what it purports to teach. At the same time, a study itself may necessitate a "steadfastness of soul", as some studies or pursuits may be painful.

Socrates provides three questions in seeming support of the thesis that small matters do not deserve the name courage. Each of the three questions would seem to have important exceptions that serve to refine Laches' assertion, and thus that refine Laches' conception of great matters. Socrates' first question is whether or not the prudent moneymaker, who acts knowing that his actions will garner him more money, is properly called courageous. Although Laches' enthusiastic dismissal of the moneymaker's art has some merit, it is not the full account. Laches himself was willing to see courage in relation to other money matters, namely poverty (191d), presumably because poverty entails hardship. Given this, one can discern certain situations in which even the prudent moneymaker is courageous. For instance, one may consider a contemporary Athenian, resisting the temptation to squander his money on frivolous pursuits, and ignoring the ridicule of those who make light of responsible men, in order to spend his money prudently out of respect for his family and his *polis*. One of the more chilling passages in Thucydides reminds us that this

need for courageous moneymakers was more than an idle possibility within recent memory of the dramatic date of the dialogue:

> The sacred places…in which they had quartered themselves were full of corpses of persons that had died there, just as they were; for as the disaster passed all bounds, men, not knowing what was to become of them, became utterly careless of everything, whether sacred or profane…Many from want of the proper appliances through so many of their friends having died already, had recourse to the most shameless modes of burial…Nor was this the only form of lawless extravagance which owed its origin to the plague. Men now did just what they pleased, coolly venturing on what they had formerly done only in a corner, seeing the rapid transitions produced by persons in prosperity suddenly dying and those who before had nothing succeeding to their property. *So they resolved to spend quickly and enjoy themselves*, regarding their lives and riches as alike things of a day.[53]

The example of prudent and courageous moneymakers points to an important clarification regarding the nature of courage. Courage is often not exemplified by a sudden, conspicuous, act of daring, as typically recognized in military affairs. Rather, it is often the continual choice to endure harsh realities, in great matters and for great lengths of time, despite easy and tempting alternatives, that is the sign of someone's courage.

The troubles that the Athenians have had to suffer are again alluded to in Socrates' second and central example: "some doctor, when his son or someone else has an inflammation of the lungs and begs to be given drink or food, [who] didn't bend but was steadfast" (192ed).[54] Laches does not see this as an instance of courage, but Socrates' example is worth scrutiny. The father-doctor example is first of all revealing in that the son is not courageous or wise enough to come to terms with the fact that his medical treatment—abstaining from food and drink—is what is best for him, while the father does possess the means and the willingness to treat his son.

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[53] Thucydides, 2.533-2.532 (emphasis added)
[54] Cf. *Ibid.* 2.154.

Thus the son, although surely told that abstaining from food or drink will alleviate his sickness, steadfastly resists what is good for him. He is unable to rule his natural and immediate desires for a good that is in the future. The father-doctor is courageous, however, not merely because he acts on the basis of his technical knowledge, the ostensible interpretation that gave rise to Laches' dismissal of the example. Instead, the courage of the father-doctor must be seen in light of the contrary passions that are present in his soul. The child, pleading and crying to his surely sympathetic father, evokes compassion for his sufferings, potentially including his suffering from a fear of death. In this way, the son's state of soul is not wholly the son's own; the relevance of the doctor also being the father of the boy is that the father feels compassion for his son, and thus shares in his son's sufferings and fears. Yet, the father *overcomes* his immediate paternal compassion to follow his reason. He must have the courage to act according to what he knows as a doctor, and thus realizes what is in the best interest of the object of his love. As a result, this type of man exemplifies the courageous rule of passion and reason, *in successful alliance,* against the appetitive inclinations of the child.

Socrates' example invites comparison with the physician of the soul, implicitly alluded to earlier in the dialogue (185e). The parallel suggests that if virtuous souls are healthy souls, one should seek physicians of the soul when one is vice-ridden. However, such a comparison also brings the essential differences between sickness of body and sickness of soul to light. The ability (or even willingness) to distinguish sick souls from healthy souls is itself already a measure of health unavailable to the patient with a truly sick soul. As for those with sick souls

who are nonetheless still healthy enough to make such distinctions, a second problem emerges; knowledge of the differences between healthy souls and sick souls does not entail knowledge of how to treat a sick soul so as to make it well. As the dialogue persistently attests, the question of how best to care for one's own soul is not a simple question. The problem, however, is compounded by the need to obey one's reason in the face of natural, persistent desires—such as the sometimes unhealthy desires for food or drink—that impel one to act contrary to one's reason. That the desires in question are usually a source of nourishment for the body, and at times even for the soul, is also a reminder that reason must continually rule qualifiedly good desires, desires that must be fed or abstained from depending on the context in which they arise. In short, the ruling of one's desires requires prudential judgment to distinguish which and when desires are healthy or otherwise.

From the standpoint of the physician, rather than the patient, one faces a different problem, one portrayed by two obvious dramatic analogues. Socrates, the virtuous physician, must treat patients who do not want to accept the prescribed regimen; the "children" must be willing to undergo Socratic treatment to tend to the health of their souls. The father-doctor example also recalls Lysimachus and Melesias, two fathers who are attempting to educate or "treat" their sons. However, inasmuch as the two fathers are neither good fathers nor good doctors, they will have to attend to their own virtue in matters of rule and of health. One should not overlook, however, the crucial component of love of one's own that is inherent in the fatherly education of sons, a love implied in Socrates' example. Such love gives rise to a tension in the rule of sons, one between the experts in education, such as

Socrates, who may only care for the sons insofar as they are good students, and those who love and rule their sons as their own, such as Lysimachus and Melesias. The dialogue's end will have us reflect on this pressing political problem.

Socrates' third example again raises the problem of the relationship between prudence and courage, bringing Laches' perhaps most contradictory stance toward virtue to the forefront; it may even recall Laches' tragic fate at Mantinea.[55] Socrates asks whether or not "the man who is steadfast and willing to fight, calculating prudently and knowing that others will come to his aid, that he will be fighting against fewer and inferior men than those he is with, and further that he holds stronger ground" (193a), is more courageous than the man who fights in the opposite camp, without such prudence and preparation. Laches, answering in line with ordinary opinion, asserts that the man in the opposite camp is more courageous. Is he? Socrates' example, pointing to Laches very different reactions to the calculating military man and the man who fights against the odds, implicitly questions Laches' belief in the unity of virtue.[56] The problem, of course, is that if the prudent man is less courageous than the imprudent man, then courage and prudence cannot always be harmoniously conjoined in one man, thus posing both a pedagogic and an epistemological problem of the first order. Laches' belief is hard not to share; like Laches, we seem to recognize feats of daring in the face of overwhelming odds as

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[55] For a consideration of this possibility, cf. Schmid, 122. Some reservation is in order, however, as the historical evidence does not make Laches' role in the military decision clear, nor is it clear that we should believe that the opposing force "of Spartans and Helots…upon a scale never before witnessed" (Thucydides 5.642; cf. also 5.68), was made up of "inferior men" as compared to the Argive-Athenian alliance (193a). Nevertheless, the striking similarities raise the possibility that Plato is referring to Laches' own conduct.

[56] Compare *Protagoras*, trans. C.C.W. Taylor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 348c-351b. For the relevance of Laches' reaction in light of the *Protagoras*, cf. Coby, *Socrates and the Sophistic Enlightenment: A Commentary on Plato's Protogoras* (Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1987), 137.

more courageous than prudent military calculation. This judgment was implicitly present in the earlier assessment of Socrates' own courage in battle, where he had the courage rationally to retreat in the face of overwhelming odds (181ab).[57] At this point, it is worth underlining the perplexing nature of this problem; only in his later inquiry with Nicias does Socrates give hope that it may be resolved.

Socrates focuses his attention on exploring foolish steadfastness, and thus on increasing Laches' perplexity, giving three or four new examples to this purpose. Martial examples—cavalry battles and the sling or the bow—dominate. However, rather than a third or fourth martial example, Socrates turns to those who are clever in diving, as opposed to those who are not. The turn away from war is noticeable, and highlights a common thread throughout the examples, the focus on individualistic instances of courage or imprudence. However, the absence of the common good, and Socrates' turn from martial examples, should have us recall a seemingly more appropriate example than that of diving. Behind Laches' conception of courage is Laches' admiration for the Greek ideal of hoplite warfare. As stated, the distinctive aspect of hoplite warfare is the cohesiveness of the army, one simultaneously fights for one's own good and for the good of one's fellow combatants. In Socrates' examples, the man who privately strives for great deeds is recognized for his courage partly because he strives for great things, and partly because his striving is not inimical to the common good. In contradistinction to this solitary striving, hoplite formation has a persistent and pressing reason why one must be steadfast, in attack *and* in retreat, with the odds *and* against the odds. One must be steadfast for the good of others, and thus one must be courageous not only for oneself, but also for the sake

[57] *Symposium*, 221ac.

of the common good. Consequently, the coward in the ranks is more than simply a coward, he is, as a result of his cowardice, also unjust; he does not fulfill his responsibility to his comrades and to his polity. The seemingly intentional passing over of justice points to a problem that is revisited later in the dialogue, namely the relation of the virtues to each other.

Socrates' next question raises the importance of daring, and our inclination to see it as courage. Socrates poses whether or not "foolish daring (*tolmēs*), and steadfastness, [was] revealed…in what preceded to be shameful and harmful" (193d). However, this is not exactly what Laches agreed to earlier (192d). The first discrepancy is that the earlier argument attempted to reveal foolish steadfastness as evil doing or harmful, but was silent on the issue of foolish daring. The examples, however, alert us to this distinction between foolish daring and foolish steadfastness. With the possible exception of the men who held their ground against greater odds, the examples Socrates gave were less examples of foolish steadfastness than examples of foolish daring. Given this, we may be more appreciative of Laches' definition of courage as steadfastness, rather than courage as daring; consistently overcoming one's fears, so as to be steadfast in battle, is usually significantly more difficult than having a brief moment of impetuosity, and is often less foolish. Although foolish steadfastness may not be wholly good, it may be closer to courage than foolish daring. Reflection on the differences between Spartan and Athenian military accomplishments certainly seems to bear this out. Sparta's notorious plodding steadfastness, in contradistinction to Athens' brilliant displays of daring, is arguably what won Sparta her reputation for the most courageous among the Greeks.

The difference reflects the distinctions that are already evident between Laches and Nicias; Laches' public spirited and Spartan account of courage focuses on constancy of soul, whereas Nicias' individualistic and Athenian account of fighting in armor has focused on individual feats that seem daring (cf. 182c). Although Laches' and Sparta's emphasis on steadfastness may be closer to courage, and in particular civic courage, it lacks an essential part of courage, the capacity for daring. On the level of the city, one may question whether Sparta's traditionalism and emphasis on steadfastness may be combined with the innovativeness and daring of Athens. The fate of Sparta after the war certainly suggests that they may not be compatible. Yet, Laches cannot hide behind the possibility that his steadfastness is the better of two mutually exclusive alternatives. Socrates presents the clear example of someone who is able to combine both steadfastness and daring in one man. Socrates, as evidenced by his conduct in the dialogue, is willing to challenge his own opinions and speeches not for brief moments at a time, but for his lifetime. Through his "steadfast daring" he hints at what is needed for someone to claim the honor of being truly courageous.

The second major difference between Socrates' question and what Laches actually agreed to is the change from harmful and evildoing to harmful and shameful, a change which Laches does not protest. Unlike evildoing, shame may be understood in terms of the strictly human things, and may be informed by human convention. In other words, to acknowledge shame is not necessarily to acknowledge a divine or transcendent ground for what is regarded as shameful. The claim of evildoing, on the other hand, *necessarily* commits one to a transcendent claim that evil is objectively such, *independent* of human conventions. That the shameful is not distinguished

from evildoing points to an important facet of Laches' nature. Laches apparently does not distinguish the shameful from evil, as he does not see a meaningful distinction between the shameful and evildoing. That is to say, Laches implicitly rejects the possible distinction, outlined above, between the bad according to the conventions of a polity, and the bad according to a transcendent ground. Instead, Laches, exemplifying citizen virtue, seems to believe that to do shameful acts, those which transgresses the polity's opinions of the noble and good, is at the same time to do evil acts.

It is at this point of the dialogue that the importance of Socrates' deft shifts in language become somewhat clearer. Socrates, first reminding Laches that "courage was agreed to be something fine (or noble, beautiful; *kalon*)", notes that "now in turn we assert to the contrary that that shameful thing, foolish steadfastness, is courage" (193d). Socrates responds to Laches'—presumably reluctant—agreement with a question, namely whether or not what they are saying is fine. Prior to criticizing the outcome of the discussion himself, Socrates appeals to the beauty or nobility of what has been spoken thus far. That the standard of nobility or beauty is being appealed to is immediately verified by Socrates' next move. Socrates argues, exploiting Laches' earlier argument, that they are not harmoniously tuned to the Dorian mode, as their speeches do not match their deeds. Not only is the Dorian mode an effective (albeit somewhat misleading) standard, invoked by Laches' himself, it is grounded in the beauty of harmony, in this case harmony between speech and deed. The invocation of this earlier standard, particularly in the context of the question of whether they have acted finely in what they have said, emphasizes the status of the noble as a

standard for assessing their current performance. They are not in a fine condition, as their speeches *about* courage do not seem to match their deeds *of* courage.

Socrates' call to courage in speech, that "in deed…someone would declare that [Socrates and Laches] partake in courage, but in speech…he would not" (193e), also plays on the possible double-sense of courage in speech. In the first instance, courageous speech is to make a speech that exhibits one's courage (such as speaking out for justice, in spite of the danger it entails). However, courage in speech potentially entails the courageous pursuit of the truth—one may need courage to give an account in *logos*. For instance, giving an account of whether or not one is obligated to go to war for one's polity may require one to courageously overcome one's fears, so that one does not taint one's account by rationalizing away one's duty out of fear. Socrates emphasizes the need for both senses of courage in speech by bidding Laches to be steadfast, and concurrently implies that not enduring Socratic questioning, because of the suffering it may entail (such as the suffering of embarrassment or shame), is cowardly. Socrates also implicitly ratifies what seemed clear in his initial treatment of steadfastness as courage, namely that perhaps "steadfastness itself is often courage" (194a).

Socrates' alleged motivation for their being steadfast is the concern that "Courage Herself" not ridicule them, and consequently invokes two reasons why one should seek courage. The first is the standard of shame, specifically the shame of being ridiculed by "Courage Herself". Socrates will seemingly reject this standard of shame later in the dialogue (201b); thus, whether Socrates is motivated by the fear of ridicule by "Courage Herself" can be doubted. The second motive is the desire to be

courageous (insofar as remaining steadfast is being courageous), a motive that stands apart from the utilitarian concerns of the men present. "Courage Herself" is something real and good, irrespective of reputation. Laches' response, that a love of victory has taken hold of him, reveals the potential effectiveness of both standards, at least upon men such as Laches.

Socrates' exploitation of the convention of language—the word "courage", literally "manliness", is in the feminine gender, hence is divinized as a Goddess—is one of the more memorable passages in the dialogue.[58] This divine female, Courage Herself, takes the stage, gently mocking Socrates and Laches for their not seeking her "courageously". The very locution is amusing: Courage *Herself* is intertwined both with what is distinctively male and, thus, with male virtue par excellence. But far from being simply a clever play on words, the appeal to Courage Herself has important implications. Pedagogically, Socrates gives Laches an erotic object for his excited love of victory. Until this point, what has been sought in speech is a comprehension of the masculine by the masculine. By mocking Laches from the standpoint of the feminine, Socrates has transformed the task to one of the masculine attempting to redeem himself in reference to the feminine. Socrates thus attempts to

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[58] Of course, this linguistic "change" of the sex of courage, from the masculine to the feminine, should have us reflect on what it would mean for courage personified to be female. Yet, understanding this question takes us to a depth that is left unexplored in the dialogue, one that is only pointed to at this decisive moment. The nature of the male-female divide, so that the Greek word for courage is a practical equivalent for manliness, is only explored via the masculine. The problem is intimately bound with a discussion of language itself, as Socrates' curious inversion points out. Moreover, drawing attention to the linguistic connection between manliness and courage directs one to the problem of convention and nature generally. Although it is the case that Greek has the affinity between manliness and courage, one must ask what role the Greek language and convention has had in influencing the Greek understanding of manliness and courage, and what role the nature of courage has had in influencing Greek language and convention. Clearly the tracks of language would have us suspect a natural affinity between manliness and courage, not as an exclusive virtue possessed only by men, but as a dominant one. However, only a radical investigation, one that gave the natural ground for the Greek language and thus for Greek conventions, could lay claim to the philosophic account of courage entire.

interweave Laches' desire for victory in speech with an erotic desire for approval by Courage Herself. If this attempt is to fail, and we have plenty of grounds for suspecting that Socrates knows it will, Laches will at least have a more sympathetic portrait of the philosopher, one that will continue to command his respect in the future.

It is of no small importance that Laches is "truly irritated" by his inability to meet Socrates' challenge—that is, by his own *aporia*, his "perplexity". Laches inability to grasp in speech what he perceives in his mind strikes at the very essence of Laches' being.[59] His reaction reveals that he is capable of the seriousness of dialectics, if only for a brief moment and only while under the spell of Socrates. Laches is struck by Socrates' spell because Laches has courageously put forth his opinion of courage, one on which he stakes his entire life—past, present, and future. Laches recognizes that, due to his ignorance, he is unable to defend, in *logos*, his entire way of life. Although Laches has lost his self-certainty, he has gained an admiration for Socrates and those who willingly choose and carry on the philosophic life. Perhaps in traditional Sparta, where there are neither men such as Socrates nor men such as Stesilaus, the public spirited general need not undergo such an education. However, in Athens, where men like Stesilaus and Nicias succeed alongside the

[59] For an account concerning the importance of Laches' staying fast to his experiential knowledge of courage, cf. Charles L. Griswold, Jr., "Philosophy, Education, and Courage in Plato's *Laches*", in *Interpretation* Vol. 14, No. 2 & 3, (May & Sept. 1986): 177–193, who argues, "Laches complains that although he knows what courage is he does not know how to articulate it adequately. Socrates never denies that Laches does know, in some way, what courage is. The superiority of Laches to Nicias lies in just that fact. Nicias, by contrast, may have 'forgotten' (failed to 'recollect') what he is talking about" (192).

genuine philosopher, men like Laches must be convinced both of the good of philosophy and of the danger of false claims to wisdom.

Laches naturally translates Socrates' feminine courage into a hunting metaphor, complaining that what he had perceived in his mind as courage has fled away from him. This hunting metaphor is not exclusively a hunt for animal game, but has implicitly been associated with the male Laches hunting the feminine. It is only the conquest of Courage Herself, a courage placed beyond the exclusively martial courage of Laches, which will fulfill Socrates' and Laches' desire to know. Socrates confirms the hunting metaphor with advice for the hunt: they must pursue their game, and "not give over" (194b). In doing so, Socrates, for the first time, names Laches his "friend". To aid in their attempt to pursue what is in essence philosophic game, Socrates advises they summon Nicias, in case he proves "more resourceful" than them in some respect; Laches politely, if reluctantly, accepts, asking "why not" (194b). Socrates thereby subtly calls attention to Laches' *aporia*, his "lack of resources". The mention of resourcefulness, as well as the earlier erotic metaphor, point to the fact that the kind of hunting involved in dialectics is distinct. A hunting party may share in the enjoyment (and danger) of hunting down a boar, but only one of the hunters will be able to keep the prized head, regardless of the collective conduct of the hunt. Alternatively, hunting for an understanding of courage is a type of hunt wherein the prize can be fully shared by all, should the party prove worthy of the task. Such philosophic hunts, then, provide an ideal ground for friendship.

Yet, Socrates' reintroduction of another important metaphor, the ship tossed at sea, reminds us that sharing the good of philosophizing entails, at the shame time,

sharing the danger of philosophizing. Philosophy has entered the *polis*, where all suffer the dangers of the ship alike. Socrates thus calls for the courage in politics and sailing that he earlier pointed to, a point that has already been ratified by Laches (191de). Although Socrates may pilot the ship to the best of his abilities, the storm tossed ship metaphor, and the need for courage, imply that he and the ship he is piloting may suffer a fatal crash. Taking philosophy seriously is not only taking the good of philosophy seriously, but also taking the challenge and dangers (dangers that are not entirely one's own) that it poses seriously as well. It is distinctive of courage, after all, that there be some danger in the face of which one is courageous.

The remainder of the dialogue will prove in deed that Laches' steadfastness is inferior to that possessed by Socrates, a man who willingly endures ridicule and *aporia* previously beyond Laches' imagination. Socrates' task, in addition to the probing of the purely manly man, is political; he has tacitly distinguished knowledge from opinion for Laches, and has thereby given the manly man a defense of philosophy that is persuasive. It remains to distinguish philosophy from sophistry—in the action of the dialogue, that is, for the former term is never mentioned. The move from the hunt to the ship now begins the move to the concerns of the polity. It is to this task that the dialogue now turns.

III. Nicias and courage (194d-199e)

(i) Courage as the knowledge of the terrible and confidence inspiring things (194c-197e)

Having been called upon by Socrates, the "resourceful" Nicias re-enters the conversation by referring back to a "fine thing" that Socrates has spoken of on an earlier occasion (194c). While silently observing the preceding conversation, Nicias has let pass several obvious occasions to offer this helpful advice: the beginning of the dialectical half of the dialogue, where Socrates first asked "what virtue is"; and Laches' struggling attempts to define courage, where Laches certainly required aid in responding to Socratic questioning. As we shall soon see, Nicias' unwillingness to interject in Socrates' and Laches' discussion contrasts dramatically with Laches' repeated interjections into Socrates' interrogation of Nicias. Nicias' reluctance implies that his intention, at least in the first instance, is not to understand what courage is, or to teach Laches what Laches does not know. He thereby strengthens the earlier suspicion that he was not pleased with the addition of Socrates to the conversation, an addition that Nicias himself noted would inevitably lead to such investigations. By exemplifying the negative case, Nicias provides a clear indication of what is, in part, required for genuine philosophy: willingness to undergo Socratic questioning. Nicias neither willingly challenges his own opinions, nor willingly enters a conversation where such a challenge may take place. Telling in this regard is Nicias' reliance on authority. Nicias does not offer a definition of courage, but rather refers to Socrates' previous words. Even if, by choosing to voice it at all, one may

reasonably surmise Nicias has some stake in Socrates' previous argument, Nicias' language and his passivity betray the distance between his way of life and this argument. Indeed, given his passivity, one may wonder whether Nicias truly believes the doctrine, or whether Nicias attempts to avoid Socratic inquiry by offering a "fine thing" that he has heard Socrates himself put forth on an earlier occasion.

Socrates assents, "by Zeus", to what serves as Nicias' basic premise: that "each of us is good in those things with respect to which he is wise and bad in those with respect to which he is unlearned" (194d). On its own terms, Nicias' statement here may simply mean that wisdom is always good, while being unlearned is always bad. It does not necessarily entail the more inclusive claim that all virtue is wisdom, or that all vice is a result of ignorance; thus, Nicias has not asserted that courage is wisdom. At this point, one may also note a slight ambiguity in Socrates' verification of this claim. Socrates does not make wholly clear whether he is referring to the truth of Nicias' claim, or whether he is acknowledging that he has uttered these words on a past occasion. In any event, Socrates at least thinks the phrase fit to utter, in certain types of company.

Nicias' second claim, that if the courageous man is good, he is wise, points more directly towards the doctrine of virtue as wisdom. However, if Socrates unqualifiedly believes this more loaded claim, that virtue is—or at least entails—wisdom, he does not explicitly endorse it in the present instance. Instead, Socrates turns to Laches to ask him if he has heard what Nicias stated; he did, yet he did "not particularly understand what Nicias is saying" (194d). As a result of Laches' inability to comprehend Nicias' point, Socrates rephrases Nicias' general principle, stating that

Nicias seems to him "to be saying that courage is some sort of wisdom" (194d). Socrates' reformulation of Nicias' position strongly recalls Laches' own formulation of courage, that courage is a *certain* steadfastness of soul (192bc). Socrates seemed to agree with at least part of Laches' formulation, qualifying it more precisely as *prudent* steadfastness (192cd). As a result, Socrates established a parallel account: a certain type of steadfastness of soul is courage; a certain type of wisdom is courage. Must one synthesize the two different accounts of courage, as one is apparently invited to synthesize the two halves the dialogue, to arrive at a comprehensive account? If so, is courage the combination of a certain type of wisdom, as exemplified by Nicias, and a certain type of steadfastness or strength of soul, as exemplified by Laches? Although such an exercise may be beneficial in understanding courage, the dialogue itself does not warrant the far-reaching claim that such a synthesis is courage entire. Most notably, whether one may claim that one receives an adequate account of wisdom, or of those who pursue wisdom (evidenced by the absence of the term philosophy), may be questioned.

Mindful of these reservations, it is worth recalling the difficulty which led to Laches' *aporia*, a difficulty which marked a critical problem regarding the unity of virtue. That problem may be briefly summarized thus: if the imprudent warrior who fights against the odds is more courageous than the prudent and calculating warrior who fights with the odds, the harmonious synthesis of the virtues in one man seems, in principle, impossible. We may therefore hopefully, albeit cautiously, embrace Nicias' and Socrates' apparent introduction of the thesis of virtue as wisdom. The dialogue's earlier uses of wisdom are of note in understanding its import: Laches

spoke of wisdom in relation to the harmony between men of great deeds and their speeches of wisdom, and sarcastically used the term wise to describe Stesilaus' novel scythe spear (188c, 183e). As noted, Laches' sarcastic use was a reminder of the problem of envy and wisdom, a problem caught in the way Laches, and we, speak about wisdom: wisdom is, for the most part, the only virtue commonly spoke of in derision, so as to truly mean pseudo-wisdom. It is best, then, to temper one's political hopes regarding the doctrine of virtue as wisdom; even if a man were to realize wisdom, it still remains doubtful that such a man could live openly and honestly in public life. Laches' positive use of "wisdom" is especially important in the present instance, however, insofar as it is reserved for men whose deeds accord with their wise pronouncements. His harmony principle points us to the possibility of the harmonious synthesis of virtue, realized in the man who possesses wisdom as virtue. In the first instance, this is because wisdom is the only rationally defensible position regarding the unity of virtue; only wisdom may rationally affirm itself. Moreover, it is wisdom's concern with what *is*, over and above the political realm of constant becoming, that potentially promises the grasping of the unchanging whole of virtue. In a related fashion, the possession of wisdom promises to resolve the problem that has just recently shown to be a powerful divide in Laches' soul, the seeming antagonism between prudence and courage. For why does Laches, and common opinion generally, admire the daring soldier, and hold him to be *more* courageous for setting himself against the odds? Alternatively, why does Laches, and common opinion generally, implicitly denigrate the man who calculates prudently? The answer, it seems, is that the former man *acts in the face of his fear of death*. His

mastery over his fears elicits our admiration. Laches' fear of death, one that is our own, is the powerful passion that holds sway in our interpretation of this event, a fear that ties us to the love of the transient world of becoming. Thus when seen through the lens of a fear of death, the man who strides confidently into hopeless battle, who is not commanded by his fear, seems more courageous than the man who calculates prudently. He is impressive because he does not act on the basis of what *we* fear. Conversely, we implicitly indict the prudent calculator for attempting to shirk the inevitable, for bowing to what *we* fear. Yet, the phenomenon and thus our interpretation may be doubted; the genuine pursuit of wisdom requires that one break such powerful chains, that one may know, with confidence, that one's interpretation of the world is not tainted by one's fear of death. That is to say, philosophy, above all, requires that one overcome one's fear of death, *that one learn how to die*. The pursuit therefore entails a mastering of fear, a wisdom that is not less, but more courageous than daring. Socrates' own conduct at Delium gives the glimmer of such a man, one who has so thoroughly mastered or conquered fear that he is able wisely to retreat, in the direst of conditions, without displaying any indication of his possessing fear. He is thus even more admirable than the daring man who strides confidently into hopeless battle. We must therefore ask again: does Nicias or Socrates possess such wisdom, enabling them to interpret the world on a ground currently unavailable to us? If so, is such a ground to be found in the *Laches*?

Socrates, with his partner Laches, turns to precisely this question, the type of wisdom to which Nicias is referring. Socrates questions Nicias by means of two musical examples, with the ostensible intention of separating the wisdom that

constitutes virtue from the knowledge entailed in the technical arts. Accordingly, Socrates' subsequent question, "but then what, or of what, is this knowledge", implies at least two distinct types of *knowledge* (194e). The concern is to discern the type of wisdom suggested by Nicias' conception of courage. These are, however, two alternatives concerning the relation of knowledge to courage, suggested by Socrates' locution: whether the wise man knows *of* courage, as a rational account; or whether the wise man knows courage as a productive account, such that he would in practice manifest courage. For the thesis of the unity of virtue to hold true, the latter account must hold true; the wise man's knowledge of courage must concurrently and necessarily be a possession of courage.

Socrates' choice of two musical examples continues the dialogic prominence of the latter type of knowledge, "practical" or productive knowledge. Moreover, the role of harmony, first suggested by Laches (188d), and later by Socrates (192ab, 193de; cf. also 197e), is crucial in leading to an understanding of the relationship between courage, wisdom, and education. Although Laches' standard of Doric harmony, with its emphasis on the greatest of deeds, limits Laches' own education, Socrates at least hints at the possibility of a higher harmony between the greatest speeches and the greatest deeds. Such a musical harmony also intimates the possibility that the virtues may be harmoniously conjoined, and realized, as one virtue, as distinct notes composing an harmonious chord. In asking Nicias musical questions, then, Socrates may be suggesting that understanding Nicias' doctrine is a matter of understanding the greater harmony between the virtues, rather than understanding the art of the aulos or the cithara.

It is at this point that the drama between Nicias and Laches begins to come to a head. Laches, revealing the barely concealed rivalry between the two generals, voices his disbelief at Nicias' argument, and compliments Socrates on his questioning of Nicias. That Laches is indignant in reference to a doctrine that is normally taken to be Socratic exemplifies Laches' earlier view that, to him, the goodness of a speech depends on the virtue of the speaker (188ce). It also dramatically portrays the successful alliance of the philosopher and the altogether masculine man; Laches "sees" and spiritedly reacts to the clear distinction between Nicias and Socrates in speech. Nicias' attempt to appear in Socratic garb is, consequently, a cause of righteous indignation for Laches, an indignation that was not present when Laches conversed with a man worthy of his speeches.

Be that as it may, it is unclear whether Laches would be sympathetic to this apparently Socratic doctrine, were the doctrine posited by Socrates rather than by Nicias. One may be certain that Laches holds to his alliance with Socrates due to their kinship in deeds; one may not yet be certain that Laches has realized the import of Socrates' relationship to speech, and thus the respect that should be given to Socrates' speeches on their own terms. It is important, then, that Socrates' insinuated innocence in the quarrel between Nicias and Laches, implied by his distancing himself from Laches' questions, is ironic. Socrates' pedagogic success rests on his ability to have Laches understand the significant divergence between the speeches of Socrates and the speeches of Nicias, and especially in their differing approaches to dialogue; and it is partly for this reason that Socrates both activates and moderates the rivalrous tension between Laches and Nicias. In the present instance, Socrates

stimulates it by making clear that it is actually Laches who is asking Nicias questions regarding the doctrine of virtue as wisdom, whatever Socrates himself may think about the doctrine.

Unlike Laches, who has been delivering his comments through Socrates, Nicias addresses his definition of courage directly to Laches. Nicias clarifies his initial claim, responding to Socrates' characterization of his position, that "courage is a *certain* wisdom" (194d, emphasis added). Nicias' definition, that courage is "the knowledge *of* terrible and of confidence-inspiring things, both in war and in all other things" (195a, emphasis added), suggests that acting courageously is exclusively a matter of knowing what is truly terrible and what truly inspires confidence. In this way, Nicias grounds his definition of courage on a wholly rationalistic conception of courage, taking a clear stance on the character of knowledge; it is knowledge *of* things.

One cannot help but laugh as Laches denounces Nicias' argument as strange, since wisdom and courage are "doubtless distinct", and frankly proclaims Nicias' doctrine to be "rubbish" (195a). Although Socrates admonishes Laches to teach Nicias (implying that there is merit to Laches' point), rather than revile him, it is now Nicias' turn to deride his fellow general. Nicias responds that Laches simply wishes to prove him ignorant, in the same way Laches has been proven ignorant by Socrates. Absent in their mutual fixation on each other is any indication, by either general, that they actually wish to see if they are ignorant, for the possible good such a knowledge would entail. The hilarity of the drama—one tinged with a touch of tragedy, however, in light of their historical fates—is not incidental to the philosophic point of

the dialogue. Although Courage Herself may or may not be ridiculing Laches, and despite the previous military and political achievements of both generals, Laches' and Nicias' actions appear ludicrous. The significance of Nicias' own role in the comedy of the *Laches* remains to be seen; Laches' role is, for the most part, clear. The masculine and courageous Laches' remains fixated on the public sphere, and his place in it, rather than on the status of his own soul. Although Laches is able to follow Socrates through certain hard questions and questionings, his failure, however noble, is comical in its ineptness. In so presenting it, Plato has the reader regard the wholly public life, devoid of self-examination, as comical. Our laughter, however, in large part rests on the belief that we succeed where Laches fails. Yet, insofar as we too are unable to truly endure and succeed in Socratic questioning, are we not just as worthy objects of laughter?

Perhaps indicating a growing respect for speeches, and to his credit, Laches turns to the task of proving, through Socratic questioning, that Nicias is speaking nonsense. Laches' attempt at Socratic questioning, though beset with obvious weaknesses, is nonetheless worthy of examination, as it provides insight into what he believes is the nature of Socratic inquiry. First, in his example of the doctor, Laches does not have Nicias separately and slowly answer his three questions, but instead successively presents the questions without pause: "In the case of illnesses, do not doctors know the terrible things? Or in your opinion do courageous men know? Or do you call doctors courageous" (195b)? Laches thereby reveals his belief that there is an obvious and true response to each of his questions, and that the use of questions in argument is purely for rhetorical effect. However, even Laches' rhetorical attempt

is lacking; without the pause and prodding that is typical of Socratic questioning, Laches does not pique Nicias' curiosity; and without having Nicias respond successively to each of his questions, Laches does not cultivate Nicias' involvement in the inquiry. In sum, Laches reveals that his understanding of Socratic inquiry, or at least the type of Socratic inquiry he is willing to practice, is superficial. Laches sees "questioning" as a means of making self-evident assertions, and does not see questioning as a means of leading to the deeper questions.

However, in Laches' favor, and in possible contrast to the (allegedly) forgetful Lysimachus (189c), Laches clearly refers to the earlier argument regarding courage (193a). Moreover, Laches' argument does have intrinsic merit of its own. Laches, having absorbed the point that Socratic questioning often rests on recognizing experts in knowing, is able to point to the contrast between the technical artisans that know their art, and those who we ordinarily regard as courageous men, men such as Laches, who do not necessarily possess any such technical knowledge. Laches' argument rests on the conventional wisdom that doctors, not courageous men, know the things which are terrible in the case of illnesses, and that farmers, not courageous men, know the things that are terrible in farming. Yet, neither the doctor nor farmer is made courageous by their knowledge, presumably because what is terrible to the doctor or farmer—death or famine—is ultimately beyond their control. Both, then, require courage apart from their technical knowledge if they are to overcome their terror.

Socrates, by noting that Laches "does seem to be saying something" (195c), apparently agrees with at least part of Laches' questioning. He accordingly questions

Nicias regarding Laches' arguments; Nicias protests, claiming that although Laches is "saying something", it is not "not something true" (195c). Socrates must ask for clarification: "How so" (195c)? Although in the first instance his question, "how so", refers to how in particular Laches has erred (195c), it also may refer to a more general and far-reaching problem. Socrates' words, particularly in reference to other occurrences of "somethings" throughout the dialogue (for instance, cf. 190c, 193c, 196c, 199e), seem to point to a major problem concerning the relationship of language to reality. Socrates intimates that having something to say is necessarily having something that is possibly valid to say, hence worth considering. Socrates thus seems to suggest, more to the reader than to Nicias, that in order for one to genuinely say any*thing*, it must be true, to some extent. This noticeably differs from the conventional use of these words, where having something to say does not necessitate that one's speeches correspond to reality. To understand more clearly what is at issue, one may consider speech that is not rational; for instance, contradictory speech. A "square circle", although seemingly utterable as a "figure that has both the attributes of a square and the attributes of a circle", is unintelligible and unreal in any meaningful sense. One cannot conjure up an image in one's mind that fulfills the contradictory requirements, nor can one provide a rational account, or have an intelligible idea, of a square circle. More precisely, then, to say something is a "square circle" is to "say" nothing at all. As will soon become more apparent, the relationship between rational speech and reality is crucial in understanding the character of Nicias and his problematic definition. At present, it is sufficient to ask whether Nicias, like Laches, is also saying "something".

Nicias responds by implicitly choosing the answer chosen by Laches for its ridiculousness, that the courageous man, not the doctor, knows the terrible in the art of medicine. To do so, Nicias first criticizes Laches' conception of technical knowledge, particularly his belief that artisans know what is terrible in the art. According to Nicias, the doctor knows *only* "what is healthful and unwholesome", and does not know whether it is better for some to be sick rather than to be healthy, or for some to die rather than to live on. However, Nicias chooses the example that perhaps most belies his point; *all* (mentally sound) people, and not simply the courageous, know that it is better to be healthy than to be sick. Health is one of the few things that is recognized by virtually everyone as being unqualifiedly good. As a result, Nicias points to a definition of courage as knowledge that is so commonly and easily possessed that it renders courage as knowledge trivial to the point of meaningless. Nicias argues, in effect, that we are all courageous, in that the knowledge required is analogous to knowing which is terrible and which confidence inspiring: health or sickness. Nicias' willingness to argue his point on this transparently flawed health example may aid him in maintaining a coherent position, but it also calls Nicias' desire for the truth about courage into question.

Nicias' response also passes over the important point that the willingness to act in accord with this knowledge of "courage"—that health is unqualifiedly good—is hardly universal. Nicias' account rests on a conception of knowledge that does not properly situate rational judgments in the context of the human soul making such judgments, and thus does not account for the powerful passions or desires that impel the human soul to act contrary to reason. Recognition of the important role the

desires and passions play in the soul leads, at the same time, to a recognition of courage as a mark of human excellence. It may be straightforward to identify physical sickness as terrible; it is much more difficult for one to possess the psychic fortitude always to act in accord with what knows of sickness, to abide by the doctor's prescription. Nicias' example of knowledge, whether or not one should "get up from an illness", is an important illustration of this point (195d). While many people may believe that only the good life, and not life itself, is worth living, carrying out such knowledge when it conflicts with one's instinct to life, and when one is beset by the fear of death, requires a strength of soul that is beyond many people. For truly learning how to die at one's bedside, without the honors that may be granted to those who die in battle, and thus without the illusion of immortality inherent in man's love of honor, is no easy matter.

Socrates, in response to Nicias' reformulation of the courageous man as the "knower of terrible and not terrible things" (195d), asks whether Laches fully perceives in his mind what Nicias is saying. Socrates' question recalls Laches' earlier claim, that he does "perceive in [his] mind what courage is", but it fled away from him, rendering him unable to "grasp [courage] in speech and say what it is" (194b). Socrates' question raises the possibility that a comprehensive account of courage may be found in the dialogue, and that it is akin to a knowledge of the terrible and not terrible things. In other words, is Nicias' definition what Laches implicitly had in his mind when he perceived what courage is, but which had fled away from him when he had attempted to articulate it?

In response to Socrates' question, Laches, based on his interpretation of Nicias' argument as applied to the question of whether it is best to live or die, defers to the pious ground of those who are presumed to possess knowledge of the future, the diviners. Laches intimates that if courage is knowledge of the "terrible and not terrible things" (195d), those who know what "terrible and not terrible things" will occur in the future know how one should act in the present. He presumably finds such reasoning compelling, as he does not see the questions attendant in determining what is good, or what is truly terrible, and thus in determining whether the future life predicted by the diviners is a good one. Consonant with his nature as a public man, one who acts based on beliefs he takes to be certain, Laches also believes he fully perceives what Nicias is saying. However, it is clear from his response that Laches does not fully understand Nicias' claim; he does not see the questions inherent in determining what is good and bad. Laches' certainty is at once the ground for his acting politically, and is at the same time what insulates him from true philosophic questioning. Laches is still too involved in a life of political action and certain belief to seriously question whether he understands Nicias' point; an idea that is potentially courage itself has fled away from him.

Nicias is rightly taken aback by Laches' interpretation of his argument. Although Nicias' reply is beset by its own problems, Laches, as a result of misunderstanding Nicias' argument, is unable truly to challenge Nicias' position. Nicias' argument, soon to be refined by Socrates, is that craftsmen do not possess the same knowledge as courageous men; they do not possess knowledge of what is

terrible and what is not.[60] Laches' diviner, even if able to predict future victories and future defeats, is unable to account for the goodness of those victories or defeats. Laches has the quite sensible view that victory, like health and wealth and life itself, is obviously good. For this reason, Laches is reluctant to concede or consider Nicias' point. Unlike Nicias', who is able to best Laches in speech, Laches must appeal to Socrates to identify what is the precise problem in Nicias' argument. Laches' rather lengthy complaint against Nicias is founded upon Nicias' unwillingness to give an instantiation of the courageous man, or the man who knows what is courageous and what is not. It is telling that Laches' only conception of what Nicias could be referring to, someone who knows and acts according to what is truly terrible, and is not "the diviner or the doctor or anyone" (196a), is a god. Presumably, Laches interprets Nicias' claim to mean that the courageous man is one who knows the goodness or badness of defeats as assessed in reference to a divine ground, over and above the human judgments about such matters. In that way, only a god could distinguish what is terrible from what is not terrible, whereas men must act on human opinions, to which they are necessarily confined. Laches' accusation of legal eristic is thus based on Nicias' attempt to rely upon some divine source of wisdom, one that transcends and thus supercedes the human realm, without being able to provide for its

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[60] Compare Socrates' reference to diviners in his "dream", and his subsequent discussion with Critias, in the *Charmides*, trans. Thomas G. West and Grace Starry West (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1986), 173a-174d. For a comparison between Nicias' argument and the one introduced by Socrates in the *Charmides*, cf. Walter Schmid, *Plato's* Charmides *and the Socratic Ideal of Rationality* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1998), 134-139, where he notes that the Socrates' reference points to "the essential difference between the knowledge of human things pertaining to their moral value, and that pertaining to prediction of the events themselves. This division is basic to the overall structure of Socratic ethics, since it reflects the distinction between the moral welfare of the soul or whole person, which is sufficient for and constitutive of happiness, and the goods of the body and of fortune, which are at best secondary to it" (136). In contrast, Critias, like Nicias (as soon becomes more apparent), shows an ambivalence regarding "the sovereignty of the moral over the nonmoral values in human life and happiness" (138).

possibility. Included in this problem is Nicias' inability to show that the ordinary opinions regarding the goodness of health or sickness, or victory or defeat, are false or misleading.

Laches is also clearly indignant with Nicias, since Nicias has angered Laches by unjustly adorning himself in speech. Implicit in Laches' appeal to Socrates is the recognition that true philosophic dialogue requires both honesty and friendship to be worthwhile. Laches is therefore brought to see the profound spiritual difference that separates Nicias from Socrates and himself (at least as he sees it), not just in deed, but also in speech. Although Laches' indignation stems from the opinions and justice of the political realm, the pretense of wisdom when one is not wise is perhaps the injustice most worthy of indignation.

Following Laches' reaction, Socrates, not without a touch of humor, accepts Laches' tacit renewal of their alliance. In the process, Socrates voices agreement for Laches' claim that one should one should not "adorn [oneself] in vain with empty speeches" (196c). Socrates, however, is intent on assessing whether or not Nicias is consciously adorning himself in vain, a conclusion Laches thinks is already sufficiently obvious, but which Socrates believes they should both investigate in common. According to Socrates, then, they must "see if Nicias doesn't think he is saying something and not saying these things for the sake of a speech" (196c). Socrates expressly leaves open the possibility that there might be some validity to what Nicias is saying: if Nicias "is revealed to be saying something, [they] shall accede to it, and if not, [they] shall teach him" (196c). In the final analysis, Laches

may be indignant for good reason, but Socrates will not be satisfied until such reasons are confirmed by rational inquiry.

Socrates, demonstrating his memory in perfectly recalling Nicias' earlier formulation (195a), asks whether Nicias believes courage is the knowledge of terrible and confidence-inspiring things; Nicias agrees. Socrates second question distills Nicias' second point, that courage was not the craftsman's knowledge, but its own type of knowledge; Nicias agrees. Having solicited clarification from Nicias, Socrates now points to an implication of Nicias' argument, neither endorsing nor refuting it: Nicias cannot

> ...admit the courage of any wild animal or concede that some wild animal is so wise that...a lion or leopard or some boar knows things that few among human beings know because of their being hard to know. But he who posits courage as [Nicias posits] must of necessity assert that lion and deer and bull and monkey are by nature alike as regards courage. (196e)

On that view, one must be able to account for the obvious differentiations among animals, including their differences in matters that seem akin to courage—willingness to attack their prey, willingness to defend their herd, their young, or their own lives, violent strivings for mates or in defense of mates, and willingness to stand apart from the herd—without reference to courage. The kingly and noble lion, the graceful and predatory leopard, the wild and defensive boar, and the protective and manly bull are as absent of courage as the famously "timid" deer and the mischievous monkey. As revealed in Laches' emphatic agreement, and as intimated by Socrates' own earlier reference to Aeneas' horses (191b), such a judgment is in striking contrast to conventional wisdom. Regardless of Socrates' opinion on the matter, Socrates makes clear that if Nicias is to give a convincing account of his position, he must adequately

explain the error of conventional wisdom, and he must therefore distinguish the animals by some other means.

[119] Nicias again chooses to address his response to Laches rather than Socrates, a turn licensed by Laches' emphatic seconding of Socrates' assertion. Nicias' response shows that he recognizes at least part of the problem, arguing "that the fearless and the courageous are not the same thing" (197b). Animals are fearless because they are *stupid*; they lack *logos*. He thus goes on to distinguish rational courage from the arational boldness and suchlike, asserting

> …that a very few people have a share in courage and forethought, whereas very many—among men and women and children and wild animals—have a share in boldness (*thrasea*) and daring (*tolmēs*) and fearlessness with lack of forethought. So then, these things that you and the many call courageous I call bold (*thrasea*), and I call courageous the prudent things about which I am talking. (197bc)

Although Nicias provides some ground for distinguishing the animals from man, and rightly distinguishes three different qualities—boldness, daring, and fearlessness (cf. 184b, 193d)—his emphasis on forethought warrants suspicion regarding his stance on reason. Although forethought is doubtlessly a part of reason, Nicias' distinction rests too greatly on forethought, and not enough on a *ruling* reason that *commands* the passions. In passing over human passions—and fear in particular; his reliance on forethought, such that one is assured of success, eliminates any need to master fears—Nicias ignores the larger role reason has in life, including its possible role in courage. Socrates' appeal to our experience of distinguishing animals amongst themselves points to the importance of reason in distinguishing the human soul from that of the animals. Animals have passions, but they do not rationally will actions, some in accord with their passions, others contrary to their passions. That is to say,

the spiritedness animals clearly display in differing amounts is never rationally ruled or rationally mediated, a rational mediation that is essential to courage and to the *human* spirit; a bull may boldly antagonize his challengers, but that bull is never indignant at such challenges. That Nicias does not see this important distinction is confirmed by his collectively lumping wild animals, children, women, and certain men together. Nicias accordingly does not distinguish the ignorance of human beings from the animal's complete lack of reason: he calls "either wild animals or *anything else* that does not fear terrible things on account of ignorance not courageous but fearless and stupid" (197a, emphasis added). Pushed to its logical conclusion, Nicias' position cannot distinguish between animal ignorance and Socratic ignorance (i.e. the self-conscious recognition of one's own ignorance), and all the gradations in between.

Laches is again indignant at Nicias' response, underlining why the doctrine of virtue as wisdom, if true, is not a doctrine that is ever apt to be popularly respectable. To those unacquainted with the reasoning behind it, the assertion that courage is a type of knowledge is one that seems to attribute courage to those who are ordinarily regarded as knowers, and seems to deny the honor of courage to those who are ordinarily regarded as courageous. As a result, Laches, who is attentive to the justice of one's speech, is indignant that courageous men are not given their just honors. Although in one sense Laches' unyielding appeals to his *own* notions of justice and courage are a philosophic limitation, his decent instincts and clear concern for the political consequences of speech reveal that he is able to take philosophy seriously in a way that Nicias is not. Laches' reaction may also point to why Socrates would not endorse, in the present instance, Nicias' earlier position of virtue as wisdom.

Misinterpreted, the doctrine of virtue as wisdom alienates men such as Laches from philosophy, or from friendship with philosophy. That Laches continues to speak to Socrates, rather than Nicias, is a reminder that Socrates has not alienated Laches.

Nicias is, by extension of his argument, willing to call those men wise who are truly courageous. Nicias' apparent attempt at reconciliation, seemingly in contradiction with his earlier claim that "very few people have a share in courage and forethought" (197b), is that Laches is "wise, and Lamachus too, if indeed they are courageous—and numerous other Athenians as well" (197c). The import of Nicias' claim may be in part gathered by Laches' response: he is unimpressed, and threatens more verbal (and comic) abuse. Laches' indignation points to the limitation in Nicias' defense of courage as a certain wisdom. Nicias is willing to call those who are courageous wise, yet he does not adequately distinguish our radically different experience of the two phenomena. If courage and wisdom are harmoniously conjoined in their highest reaches, one must still account for the many manifestations of both courage and wisdom that seem quite dissimilar and disconnected. As alluded to above, most would not honor someone such as Laches as a wise man, while they would likely be willing to recognize him as a courageous man. In fact, Nicias' actual words, "if indeed [Laches] is courageous", intimates that Nicias would be prepared to deprive Laches of the honor of being courageous. However, as the dialogue has shown, Nicias' assessment would be an unjust assessment, as it would neglect Laches' substantial courage. In passing over Laches' courage, Nicias overlooks the ground upon which one is able to establish the kinship between the traditionally courageous Laches, and the courageous and philosophic Socrates.

All of Laches' complaints, of course, are meant to suggest that Nicias' deeds do not live up to his speeches; Nicias' adornment is in empty and deceptive speech. Socrates offers a sort of apology for Nicias, arguing that Laches has "not noticed of [Nicias] that he has received this wisdom from [Socrates' and Laches'] comrade Damon, and Damon keeps company a good deal with Prodicus, who, of the sophists, seems to distinguish such terms in the finest manner" (197d). However, Socrates' characterization of Nicias as a man dependent on authoritative opinions, and as a man twice removed from his real authority, Prodicus, comically impugns Nicias more than it exonerates him. Socrates' "protestation" has the additional virtue of refuting Nicias' earlier claim, that Nicias' authority has been Socrates. Laches, representing the salutary views of the city as he does, is clearly unimpressed by Nicias' possible association with the sophists, a point which Socrates is doubtlessly aware of when he refers to the sophist's chain of command. For a second time, Laches is ready to quit the argument, and only carries on the discussion as a result of Socrates' pressure. The success of Socrates' pressure is another reminder of Socrates' ability to sustain Laches' efforts in speech when Laches is unwilling to traverse alone.

(ii) Socrates' refutation of Nicias (198a-200c)

Socrates' intervention, for the sake of his indignant ally Laches, begins a change in the inquiry. Socrates, through his questioning of Nicias, first returns to the beginning of the argument: the relationship between courage and virtue. Initially, the question of the relationship between courage and virtue, was, in effect, passed over

for the sake of simplifying the argument (190d). Socrates' decision to return to this argument, and thus begin anew may be in part, a response to Nicias' earlier equation of courage with a type of knowledge. That is because such an equation tacitly raises the possibility of the unity and homogeneity of virtue. For this reason, it is fitting for Socrates to ask if Nicias too took courage as a portion of virtue, "there being other parts as well, which all together are called virtue" (198a)?

Although one may hope for clarification regarding this crucial opening step, the characterization of courage, as well as other the parts of virtue such as "moderation and justice and some other such things" (198a), is left, for a second time, ambiguous. Socrates' failure either to list wisdom in his catalogue of the parts of virtue, or to explain why wisdom is more precisely considered *the* whole of virtue, amplifies the ambiguity. Socrates' ambiguity, then, raises two obvious possibilities regarding the relation of the parts of virtue to the whole of virtue: the virtues are parts of an ordered whole of virtue, where the virtues fit together in a particular structure; alternatively, the virtues are parts of a system of class and species, where each of the various virtues partakes of the class virtue. This latter possibility becomes a plausible alternative due to Socrates' phrasing of the question, where he obliquely refers to "some other such things". On the one hand, if courage is part of a structured whole, one could not know virtue entire without knowing all of the other virtues, and their proper place in the structured whole. This would most accord with the doctrine of virtue as wisdom, since wisdom would necessarily include knowledge of all the virtues, and their place in such a structure. In this case, one may recall the example of the eyes, and the necessity of knowing the whole of human being, including its

diverse parts, to claim comprehensive knowledge of the eyes. On the other hand, if each of the virtues are species in a class called virtue, possessing the entirety of the virtues to truly possess virtue is not necessary, for the same reason a horse does not have to partake in the essence of lion to properly be named a mammal.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that Socrates, in listing the virtues, makes the first explicit mention of moderation in the dialogue. Of the four cardinal virtues that are used to such good effect in the *Republic*, it is the last to be named. Moreover, *only* Socrates mentions it, without instigation from the other men, and its mention apparently goes unnoticed by the other interlocutors. The absence of what would normally be an essential theme regarding education points one to an important question: why has the dialogue, ostensibly about courage and manliness, neglected the virtue of moderation? Are we to surmise that men such as Laches and Nicias, generals and leaders of the city, and Lysimachus and Melesias, aristocrats who have not lived up to the public reputation of their fathers, are, at base, unconcerned with such a virtue? On this note, it must be remembered that Socrates tacitly included moderation in his earlier portrait of courage, when he spoke of courage in relation to pains, pleasures, desires, and fears, even if neither Socrates, Laches, nor Nicias made this explicit. Socrates' blurring of the distinction between courage and moderation was successful insofar as Laches, his interlocutor at the time, presumed it to be included in the self-mastery he associates with manliness (*andreia*). Similarly, the failure explicitly to distinguish moderation throughout the dialogue has likely been, in large measure, a result of its importance to manliness; the men present take for granted that a man possessing *andreia* would possess moderation.

Socrates, stating agreement on their characterization of courage thus far, and continuing to summarize Nicias' argument, turns to the terrible and confidence inspiring things. Socrates asserts, in common with Laches, that what inspires fear is terrible. Fear, we learn, is the expectation of future evil, with the absence of fear being confidence inspiring. Socrates' account is again beset by an important ambiguity, underlined in his question to Nicias, where we learn that future evils are terrible, but that *both* future nonevils *and* goods are confidence inspiring. It is relatively clear that future evils are terrible, and future goods are confidence inspiring. However, Socrates prominently classifies the apparently neutral term, nonevils, as positively confidence inspiring. There seem to be at least two good reasons for Socrates' words. The first is that he may be alluding to the possible nonevil of death, one that figures so prominently in the *Apology of Socrates*. Readers of Socrates' public trial may recall that Socrates suggested death to be one of two possibilities, the first "being nothing, and the dead man has no perception of anything".[61] This view is pertinent here, since Socrates' ironic speculations about death are meant to inspire a great hope that death is good.[62] That is, contra the opinions of the many, dying is not a great evil. Insofar as this is the case, one is more confident in the face of dangers to one's life, including military dangers.

The possible second reason, related to the first, turns on the essence of evil. The term evil does not simply denote an absence or privation of good, but a substantial and transcendent evil. For this reason, the absence of evil is confidence inspiring, as one need not confront an evil independent of the human will. Instead,

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[61] *Apology*, 40c.
[62] Ibid., 40de.

the failure to obtain the good would be explicable in terms of human failings and thus human responsibility, rather than in terms of a transcendent evil that actively works against human goods (such as, in the Christian tradition, the workings of Satan). Furthermore, if there are no grounds for future *evil*, and fear is the expectation of future *evil*, it is also possible that there is a positive reason—in contrast to the absence of fear exemplified by the animals—for being fearless. The nature of Socrates' conduct at Delium may therefore be questioned; did Socrates soberly retreat because he was without fear altogether (i.e. he did not expect future evils), or because he had altogether overcome his fears?

Socrates spontaneously, and significantly, raises a "third thing" for examination as to whether they agree (198c). Presumably, the first thing is the agreement that courage is a part of virtue, and the second thing is the agreement that future evils are terrible and future nonevils or goods are confidence inspiring. Occurring directly after Nicias has just affirmed that he believes courage to be knowledge of future evils and future non-evils or goods, Socrates' argument seems to flow directly out of Nicias' future oriented argument about courage. However, Socrates clarifies that this *is* a third issue, distinct from what has gone before. Socrates' third thing is essentially a synoptic view of what it takes to *know* anything that is in the realm of becoming. Socrates asserts that knowing what has come into being, what is coming into being, and what will or what can come into being, is the same knowledge throughout. The future-oriented nature of Nicias' argument is clearly the target, as Nicias does not adequately recognize that forethought is itself based on afterthought, that one's anticipation of the future is based on what one

knows of the past and present. For instance, Socrates suggests that *knowledge* of what is terrible must necessarily entail knowledge of what has been terrible, what is currently terrible, as well as what will or can be terrible in the future. Socrates leaves out an apparent fourth category, namely feared evils that do not, and cannot, exist. This category is most obviously important regarding the existence or non-existence of the gods, but it is also important in action. In order to act, one needs to know what is not possible; one must know what has never been and what can never be. However, upon reflection, one recognizes that the basis for this judgment is simply the obverse side of the knowledge needed to recognize how all things that have come into being, are coming into being, or can or will come into being. In distinguishing this, one simultaneously distinguishes what can never come into being. One cannot directly appeal to what cannot come into being without, at the same time, appealing to what can come into being.

Socrates' emphasis on productive knowledge is particularly notable. Socrates states that knowledge of the future, in comparison to knowledge of the things that have come into being and to those that are coming into being, is not "another [thing] about the way in which what has not yet come into being would come into being *in the finest manner* and *will* come into being; rather, it is the same knowledge" (198d, emphasis added). Knowledge, then, entails more than how things will come into being, it also entails the practical knowledge of knowing how things will come to be in the *finest* manner, and that they will, or can, come into being. Socrates thus points to the active part man plays in Being, a part that attempts to produce a noble, beautiful, or fine future. Socrates thereby indicates perhaps the most significant

deficiency in Nicias' definition of courage. Nicias' definition is essentially passive with respect to the world, and is accordingly absent of any mention of how to make things "come into being the in the finest manner"—particularly virtue in a human being.

Socrates closes his short speech on this "third thing" with four examples that prove his point: medicine, farming, war, and divination. Most prominent, perhaps, is Socrates' mention of divination. Socrates argues, and Laches agrees, that the general's art rules the diviner's art by virtue of the general's finer knowledge of the present and the future; the general attempts to rule the future, while the diviner simply predicts it. Socrates' critique thus recalls the basic assumption held by the historical Nicias, and all men who place their faith in diviners: fatalism. Socrates suggestion is perhaps the peak of the tragic irony that pervades the dialogue. Plato has Socrates clearly anticipate the historical episode that ultimately destroyed Nicias and the Athenians in Sicily, namely Nicias' relinquishing decision-making over the army to the divination that they should stay in Sicily for thrice nine days. That Nicias, as general, was not *forced* to abide by this divination, and could have made things come into being in a finer manner, may be surmised by Plutarch's account of an alternative interpretation, that "the sign was not adverse for people who were retreating, but was auspicious, since concealment is just what risky undertakings need, whereas light is inimical to them".[63] The relevance of Plutarch's comment may be deduced by Socrates' own words; the prudent general, who rules the diviner by law, should choose which divination best suits his purpose. In sum, the portrait of a passive Nicias, who lacks the willingness to affect the future for the better, and thus to rule

[63] Plutarch, 23.

the art of divination by means of the art of the general, accords with the historical *and* the Platonic Nicias: both lack the *courage* to will what reason dictates, and instead passively accept the future as determined. Ironically, then, Laches' earlier reference to diviners as the type of knowers Nicias must mean when he speaks of the courageous as knowers, is a partial truth. Nicias' passive attitude towards the future, regarding it as something that is determined irrespective of the human will, gives special status to those who may predict the future.

There is another important oddity in Socrates' set of examples. In speaking of war and divination, Socrates mentions only what is coming into being and what will come into being, omitting what has come into being, though that was made explicit in the other two examples. Even a cursory understanding of martial education and divination is enough to realize that what has come into being plays a major role in shaping these arts. First, in the case of war, analysis of past episodes, of what succeeds and what fails, presents tactics and strategies for the future. However, military knowledge is distinct in that it is not an art directly tied to an unchanging nature, such as the human body, or the farmer's fields; rather, it is directed towards the transient realm of human practice and convention, and must allow for technological change (for not all military innovations are as unsuccessful as was Stesilaus' scythe-spear). Thus, the general's art is not even in principle an unchanging body of knowledge. The political implications of this fact is significant; the general's art cannot be *altogether* traditional in warfare, and cannot treat past warfare as defining an unchanging subject of inquiry. Rather, the constant threat of innovative enemies, of new military conventions and practices, necessitates one

embrace the most recent military improvements, or perish. Consequently, any account of the fall of the historical Sparta, as previously mentioned, must include Sparta's failure to keep pace with military progress, a problem that led to her devastating defeat to the Thebans by 371. It is thus a reminder that, in at least one respect, one cannot continue to have precisely the same education as one's fathers. One, at minimum, must adopt the martial inventions and practices of one's contemporaries. The need for an openness to military innovativeness, and its possible tension with the traditional opinions of the polity, is seen more acutely in reference to divination. For divination's relation to history is also unlike the relation of medicine and farming to nature. The standard of divination is not dictated by nature, but by the traditional opinions of the polity, and more particularly by the religious accounts provided by the poets. As Socrates' earlier points emphasize, however, the standard for evaluating the poets is one's knowledge of what has, is, and can or will come into being. That is to say, traditionalism, in divination and in warfare, cannot be defended by an appeal to the past, but must be defended philosophically, from the present moment. A historical defense of traditionalism is in principle impossible.

Socrates' asks not Nicias, but Laches whether he agrees with the view that the general rules the diviner. Laches does agree. It is unclear, however, whether Laches understands the full import of Socrates' account. In any event, Socrates then turns back to Nicias, asking whether he asserts with them, that "in the case of the same things, the same knowledge understands the things that will be and those that are coming into being and those that have come into being" (199a)? Nicias agrees to this conception of knowledge, and gives no indication that he sees the contradictions

inherent in the positions he has espoused. The first position is that knowledge necessarily understands what has come into being, what is coming into being, and what can or will come into being. The second position, contradicting the first, is that courage is knowledge exclusively of *future* goods and *future* evils, here restated by Socrates as the terrible and confidence inspiring things (199b).

Nicias now willingly assents to another implication of Socrates' argument, that "of the same things, the knowledge is the same, both of things future and of things in all conditions" (199b). Most surprising, perhaps, is that Nicias has yet to give any indication that he sees the contradiction in the position Socrates has led him to affirm. Socrates thus makes it explicit:

> Courage is therefore not knowledge only of terrible and confidence-inspiring things. For it understands not only about future goods and evils but also about those that are coming into being and that have come into being and that are in all conditions, just like other knowledges. (199bc)

Nicias responds with his first acknowledgement of the problem, that "it seems so, at least" (199c). Absent in this demure acknowledgement is anything resembling Laches' spirited response when he was revealed to be espousing contradictory positions. Rather, Nicias confirms our earlier suspicions; Nicias is incapable of the seriousness of Socratic speech.[64]

It is worth noting that Socrates' summation of what the knowledge of courage knows has an important inclusion, namely the "things that are in all conditions" (199c). Consequently, Socrates implicitly recalls the question of the relation of becoming to being, one earlier intimated in Socrates' turn to "what virtue is" (190b).

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[64] For an account in complete opposition to this assessment of Nicias and Laches, cf. Paul Friedländer, *Plato II: The Dialogues, First Period*, trans. Hans Meyerhoff (New York: Random House, 1964), 48-49.

In the present instance, Socrates intimates that in order to understand what has, is, or will come into being, and how it will most finely come into being, one must recognize what is implicit behind the expression "coming into being", namely that there is a standard of being that a thing is tending toward; there are "things that are in all conditions". The relevance of Socrates' curious inclusion soon becomes more apparent.

Socrates asserts, by way of mathematical language, that Nicias' answer was in fact about a third of courage. "Yet", as Socrates asserts, they

> ...asked [Nicias] what the whole of courage was. And now, as it seems, according to [Nicias'] argument, courage is not knowledge only of terrible and confidence-inspiring things, but, as [Nicias'] argument now runs, courage would be the knowledge about pretty much all goods and evils and in all conditions. (199cd)

Socrates, famous for his mathematical precision, presents one of the more perplexing problems of the dialogue. What, exactly, constitutes a whole account of *courage*, such that Nicias' account was about a third of courage? The obvious response would seem to be that Socrates' curious phrase follows out of the previous discussion, and thus one's disposition to the past, present, and variable future each account for about a third of courage. Nicias' third was therefore the future part of courage, that requiring forethought. One may add that, in fact, Nicias' definition was slightly less than a third, as his definition did not account for how man may make the future come into being in the finest manner. Although this interpretation may be intuitive, it does not seem to suffice. Socrates' previous argument suggested that any knowledge is necessarily knowledge of past, present, and future. Consequently, an attempt to place a proportion on how much of something one knows, in relation to its share of

temporal reality, is in principle flawed. If Nicias knew the future aspect of courage, he would know courage entire; if he did not know the past or present aspects of courage, he would not know courage in any way at all. Even if one should be reasonably suspicious that Socrates' words are more precise than his phrase suggests, this is not the place to attempt to resolve his perplexing locution. It is perhaps better to acknowledge the mystery for what it is.

Nicias now assents to Socrates' new definition of courage, one that sounds suspiciously like wisdom. Again, Laches was ironically correct when he had speculated that Nicias must be referring to some god (196b); the comprehensive nature of Socrates' account of courage, as "knowledge about pretty much all goods and evils and in all conditions", also seems to be divine knowledge. The divine-like nature of the claim is underlined by Socrates' reference to Nicias as a "demonic man" (199d), and in Socrates' explanation that such a man would not "lack anything of virtue if indeed he knew how all good things, in all ways, come into being, and will come into being and have come into being and all bad things in the same way" (199d). Socrates' claim is sufficient to draw out his next conclusion, yet he appends a second question, again underlining the divine nature of Nicias' claim: does Nicias

> ...think that this one would be in need of moderation or justice and piety—he to whom alone it belongs, as regards both gods and human beings, to be thoroughly on his guard for the terrible things and for those that are not, and to provide himself with the good things, through his knowledge how to associate with them correctly? (199de)

First, Socrates account of Nicias' new position calls into question exactly what Socrates introduced, namely a distinction between courage and virtue. That Socrates' portrait of the virtuous man looks suspiciously like a wise man is telling; the claim

that courage is knowledge of good and evil entails that courage is indistinguishable from wisdom. One may note, then, that wisdom is absent from Socrates' list of virtues that one would not lack if one possessed virtue entire. Presumably, wisdom is absent because it has already been described, and is the virtue that entails the other virtues. Consequently, Nicias' new definition of courage as comprehensive wisdom amounts to the view, contrary to what was earlier agreed, that courage is not "a portion of virtue but virtue entire" (199e). In agreeing that it seems so, Nicias unwittingly implies that the multiplicity of virtues is mere appearance; behind them all lurks wisdom. As Socrates states, the claim focuses not on theoretical knowledge, but on practical and productive knowledge; the virtuous man must be able to "provide himself with the good things, through his knowledge how to associate with them correctly".

In spite of the questions surrounding such possibilities, we do not receive an account of virtue as wisdom, neither by Socrates nor by Nicias. Socrates instead claims, with Nicias' unenthusiastic agreement, that since they "were asserting that courage is one of the portions of virtue", that they "have not found what courage is" (199e). The obvious step, not acted upon, is to return to the opening argument that courage is a part or portion of virtue, either to refute or reaffirm it. For if virtue is wisdom, and the virtues are merely *apparent* parts, they did, in a sense, stumble upon courage. Alternatively, if courage is a part of virtue, as Laches and Socrates both seemed to argue (190cd, 195a, 198a, 199e), and Nicias' unwittingly ascended to a discussion virtue entire, it remains to be seen exactly how courage is a part of virtue. Instead, Socrates allows, as he did not before, for the two generals to engage in

bickering. Socrates' unwillingness to espouse the doctrine of virtue as wisdom, or to refute the doctrine, must be taken as an intimation that the dialogue as a whole does not fully resolve the status of the doctrine, including Socrates' relation to it.[65] Rather, one is better served by paying heed to the perplexing problems Socrates does address, including Nicias' and Laches' reactions to the possibility of virtue as wisdom.

Laches' and Nicias' next words effectively end the argument, leaving one suspecting that neither of the two men truly wishes to pursue such questions. Laches comically lampoons Nicias, and his trust in Damon. Nicias, doubtless unaware of the reflexivity of his words, claims that Laches looks toward others rather than to his own ignorance. Nicias' criticism is, of course, true. Laches' public spiritedness clearly ties him to the city and to other men more than Nicias. He thus mocks the "wisdom" of Damon, and the pretentious condescension of wise-men such as Nicias, rather than continue the discussion. On the other hand, Nicias' superficiality is far more powerful in denouncing his own words. He looks toward Laches to chastise him for looking toward other men; he claims he has spoken suitably despite the fact that he was revealed as speaking a contradiction; and he believes that his inability to give an account of courage is not a serious failing of his, but only something that must be fixed by Damon. The problem is perhaps best exemplified by the symbolism of this last gesture. Nicias, if he is not simply attempting to wriggle out of the discussion, sees the problem as purely "musical", as a matter of learning the proper speech in the most superficial of senses. Nicias' conception of speech is thus divorced from the training that is popularly tied more to gymnastic than to music. As a result, Nicias

[65] For a contrasting view, cf. Daniel Devereux, "The Unity of the Virtues in Plato's *Protogoras* and *Laches*", in *The Philosophical Review* Vol. 101, No. 4, (October 1992): 771-778. Compare also Gregory Vlastos, *Platonic Studies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 418-423.

does more than simply ignore the role "gymnastic" education or training has in life, he is also tied to a superficial conception of music, one that does not include the hardship of learning what a true musical education entails. If he had such a conception of education, perhaps he would be more willing to "fix" his argument with Socrates, as opposed to Damon.

IV. Exhortation to Seek Teachers (200c-201c)

(i) Request to Socrates to teach the lads (200cd)

The comical display between Laches and Nicias lends itself to forgetting what was principally at issue, namely what courage *is*, and whether or not it can be taught. However, this chief concern for the acquisition of courage is yet to be resolved, and the dialogue's final remarks return us to this point. Laches, after sarcastically casting aside the "wise" Nicias' rebuke, advises Lysimachus that he and Nicias be let go "as regards the education of young men", and that Lysimachus and Melesias "not…let this Socrates go" (200c). In fact, if Laches' children were of the same age, he "would do these same things" (200c). Nicias finally has cause for agreement with Laches, acceding to Laches' suggestions, and advising Lysimachus and Melesias that "if Socrates is willing to take care of the lads, to seek no one else" (200c). Nicias forewarns Lysimachus, however, that Socrates has turned down Nicias' requests to educate Nicias' son, Niceratus, in the past, and has instead recommended others (cf. 180d).

Despite the clear indication throughout the dialogue that Laches and Nicias have much to learn from Socrates, Laches' and Nicias' advice reveals that, like the vast majority of people, neither wishes to pursue the Socratic way of life. As we have seen, Laches recognizes an essential aspect of Socrates that Nicias does not, but such insight is not sufficient to transform his life. Nicias, on the other hand, is essentially blind to the real virtue of Socrates and the power of dialogic inquiry, and thus cannot

even fully appreciate the choice that is before him. Consequently, neither Laches nor Nicias are willing to assume the pedagogic position of pupil, under the tutelage of Socrates, in spite of their stated beliefs that it is beneficial for Aristeides and Thucydides to do so. Do Laches and Nicias have a defense for their turning away from Socratic inquiry? The age of the two generals is certainly a relevant consideration; in contrast to the two young men, who have the rest of their adult lives to fashion their souls in light of Socrates, the souls of the elder generals are rather firmly formed. Just as the bridling of a horse is most effective when done at the proper moment, the moment when one turns to education can be of great concern. Moreover, the generals are in positions of political and military power, and whatever reservations they may now have about their choice of life, they do have the responsibilities entailed in such offices. Laches rather clearly recognizes his responsibilities to his city, as evidenced throughout the dialogue. His civic duty may explain, in part, his foregoing Socratic inquiry. Nicias, however, cannot claim this public-spirited defense for himself; his questionable conduct in his part of the discussion, and his passive conception of courage, make it doubtful that Nicias could claim this same defense. Like the historical Nicias, the Platonic Nicias has proven to be ruled by moral cowardice and by a concern for personal reputation. In any case, these two generals despite declining Socratic questioning, however differently motivated, plainly exalt Socrates and his particular courage.

Following Laches' and Nicias' advice, Lysimachus re-enters the conversation, requesting that Socrates educate the lads. The timing of Lysimachus' re-entry is noticeable; only with the close of Socratic inquiry does Lysimachus reappear. We

may note, however, a change in Lysimachus' disposition towards education. Lysimachus no longer seems to have an interest in acquiring fame, but instead asks if Socrates will "pay some heed and join in [their] zeal for the lads to become as good as possible" (200d). Lysimachus has apparently been persuaded that there is a higher type of education, pointed to by Socrates, without ever having undergone a Socratic examination himself. Although Lysimachus recognizes the power of Socratic speech, having not actively experiencing the give and take of questioning and answering likely leaves his understanding of Socratic education, the very education he is prescribing for his sons, somewhat shallow. Although Lysimachus defers to Socrates, then, he also offers a reminder of the political limitations inherent in political advice. The fathers of the city, whose sons are being educated, are often not amenable to education to the same extent as their children. Instead, they must be persuaded of the benefits of such education, without truly knowing its nature. Socrates' impressive conduct throughout the dialogue has been, of course, sensitive to this fact, as evidenced by his politeness—his discussing philosophic and political matters in a salutary manner.

(ii) Socrates' exhortation to find teachers and wisdom (200e-201c)

Socrates' closing remarks on education follow, in one of the lengthier of his speeches. Socrates begins by acknowledging that it would be a terrible (or clever; *deinos*) thing not to join in someone's zeal to become as good as possible. Socrates thus intimates that wisdom entails responsibility, particularly in teaching those

students who zealously seek the good. Socrates, however, insists that "if in the discussion just now [he] had been revealed to know and [Laches and Nicias] not to know, it would be just to summon [him] most of all to this work, but now, however, [they] were all alike at a loss" (200e). Although teaching one's wisdom to those who wish to know—and are willing to work for it—is a matter of justice, Socrates claims he is not subject to such obligations because he is not wise. Socrates' rather clear reference to his famous Socratic ignorance is loaded with irony, and understanding this irony is the key to understanding Socrates' words. For in at least one sense, Socrates does know, a point the preceding inquiry makes clear. Not only does Socrates know enough to recommend tutors for Niceratus (180d, 200c), Socrates' knowledge, including knowledge of what he does not know, allows him to question Laches and Nicias, and reveal them as ignorant. The revelation of Laches' and Nicias' ignorance points to at least one reason for Socratic irony: to avoid envy or pernicious conflict with the men of the city, both of which may be incurred if Socrates were to claim his wisdom. However, there is also an important truth to Socrates' claim. Socrates does not know "all goods and evils and in all conditions", or "how all good things, in all ways, come into being, and will come into being and have come into being and all bad things in the same way" (199d). Socrates' life, on display throughout the dialogue, consists in the courageous *pursuit* of wisdom or virtue, not in the possession of wisdom or virtue entire.

An obvious question, then, lurks in Socrates' account. Why does Socrates not educate the lads in what he does and does not know, as he has done in his recent education of Laches and Nicias? Part of the answer is in Socrates' modification of

Lysimachus' request, a modification that implies an all-important qualification on education. Socrates admits that it would be terrible to not join in someone's zeal to become as good as possible, but he does not repeat Lysimachus' positive claim that one should zealously attempt to make others better. One's *own* zeal in becoming as good as possible is a requirement—if not *the* requirement—for undertaking a serious education. In this sense, Socrates need not choose his students at all; seeing his power and his ability in making others better, such students, who zealously wish to become as good as possible, will choose him. Plato's portrait of Socrates, and Plato's writing on Socrates in the first place, offers optimism on this point. Plato, by writing on Socrates, suggests that he pursued the question of Socrates in a way that Laches and Nicias did not. Alternatively stated, Socrates' confession of ignorance allows him to choose his students based on their ability, rather than on the demands of others. Thus, by claiming ignorance, Socrates is in command of his duty to Lysimachus and Melesias, and is similarly in command of his duty to Aristeides and Thucydides. Moreover, if potential students do pursue Socratic education, yet turn out unsuitable for such education, Socrates is not culpable for their failures. The issue is particularly pertinent in the present case, as both Aristeides and Thucydides are said, in other Platonic dialogues, to have become followers of Socrates, and yet ultimately to have rejected, for one reason or another, Socratic education.[66]

Socrates' ironic ignorance continues in the remainder of his speech. He thus goes on to state:

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[66] Cf. *Theaetetus*, trans. Seth Benardete (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 150ea, and "Theages" in *The Roots of Political Philosophy*, trans. and ed. Thomas Pangle (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1987), 130ae. Lysimachus' son, Aristeides, was respectful of Socratic education, yet unable to live in accordance with Socratic education when not in Socrates' presence, while Melesias' son, Thucydides, was overcome by vanity.

> ...I assert, men—and the speech is not one to be divulged—that we must all seek in common as good a teacher as possible, most of all for ourselves, for we are in need, and then for the lads too, sparing neither money nor anything else. But I do not counsel that we let ourselves be in the condition we are now in. (201ab)

The task is to find as good a teacher as possible, not simply for the lads, but to satisfy their own zeal in becoming as good as possible. As Socrates' intimations suggest, such striving is born out of needfulness, needfulness that they all have in common but which only Socrates seeks to overcome. A crucial element of Socrates account, then, is the appropriate response to needfulness; Socrates' counsel is to seek to improve their condition. Philosophy is not a resignation to one's fate, but an active attempt to better oneself when one realizes one is lacking, courageously attempting to make one's own soul come into being in the finest manner.

The meaning of Socrates words, however, is drawn into question by Socrates' cryptic suggestion, that "the speech is not one to be divulged". The reflexivity of Socrates words is problematic; Socrates appears to prohibit the divulgence of this speech by his interlocutors, without giving any reason, while Plato appears to divulge the speech to us. Socrates adds to the puzzling nature of his final speech by stating that "if someone ridicules [them], because at [their] age [they] think it worthwhile to frequent teachers, in [his] opinion [they] must put forward Homer, who said that 'it is not good for shame to be present in a needy man'" (201b).[67] It is puzzling because Socrates' words appear politically *dangerous*; shame is required for political life and its wholesome function, whether or not one should feel shame for admitting one's own ignorance. As Laches' earlier reliance on pride should remind us, the possibility

[67] Cf. Homer, *The Odyssey of Homer*, trans. Richmond Lattimore (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 17.347. Socrates' use of the passage implicitly associates him with the Greek hero Odysseus.

of a life beyond pride and shame is beyond most men, including courageous men such as Laches (194a).

The deeper truth of Socrates' speech is most readily seen in the resolution of the dialogue. Lysimachus, the man who opened the dialogue out of a desire for fame, and the man who dropped out of the dialogic inquiry because of his "forgetfulness", claims that he is "willing to learn with the lads—most zealously by as much as he is oldest" (201c). Needless to say, Lysimachus' deeds in the dialogue give us good reason to doubt his willingness, and particularly his ability, to learn. He further requests that Socrates "not fail to come to [his] house tomorrow at dawn so that [they] may deliberate on these same things" (201c); at present, they are to break up their conversation. Laches and Nicias, the men who showed the most promise in pursuing Socratic questioning, remain silent; even if Socrates attends, almost surely they will not. What, then, is the resolution? Socrates' speech has not been divulged, because the men present are unable to comprehend it; they are ultimately blind to the Socratic heights that call their lives into question, and to the Socratic heights that ridicule their shame. For all its dark allusions, the *Laches* is, in the end, a *comedy*.

Summary Remarks

The close of the dialogue returns us to the question posed at its beginning: why has Plato chosen *Laches* as its title? This interpretive question has facilitated a crucial insight: Laches is more *courageous* than Nicias. Through his willingness to partake honestly and frankly in Socratic speech, Laches has proven his courage in a way that Nicias has not. Although the dialogue never fully defines the nature of "what courage is", primarily because the relation of courage to virtue as a whole is left unanswered, Laches' display reveals much about the nature of courage that is not readily apparent in the dialogue's speeches. However, this insight merely points us back to the broader question which opens our interpretation: why does the dialogue as a whole characterize the historical general, Laches, as more courageous, when this general is less renowned than the historical Nicias?

The historical fame of the two generals is far from incidental. The dialogue opens not on the question of what courage is or how best to acquire courage, but rather on the question of how Lysimachus and Melesias may best acquire fame through their sons. From the beginning, their desire for fame is curiously associated with the problem of obtaining advice. In fact, fully half of the dialogue—with conflicting advice about fighting in armor, speeches on the nature of education, speeches on the nature of speeches, and speeches on the nature of Socrates—elapses before the dialogue explicitly turns to the most visible of the virtues, courage. In the process, Laches, who proves in deed to be more honest, simple, and courageous than his counterpart, allies himself with the men of visible deeds; Nicias, who proves to be

more evasive, sophisticated, and clever than his counterpart, allies himself with the men of music. It is Socrates, a man of both speeches and deeds, who illuminates the differences between these two men. Socrates' powers of speech, allied with the courageous Laches, ultimately prove Nicias' alliance with music as superficial, the stuff of linguistic tricks far removed from the virtues of courage or wisdom. Laches, by contrast, is able to translate some of his real courage into the realm of speech, albeit only while accompanied, as in the retreat from Delium, with Socrates.

This brief portrait invites an observation that may help to explain Plato's choice of title. Men like Nicias, of clever speech rather than real deeds, are more apt to succeed in political life. Although Nicias' fate in Sicily is a reminder that apparent virtue may be revealed as merely apparent, the revelation of apparent virtue as merely apparent does not occur of necessity. Consequently, men like Laches, possessors of real courage, should not remain content with the part of virtue which they possess; rather, they ought to strive for a more comprehensive realization of virtue. That is because the political realm of becoming in which men such as Laches chiefly reside is necessarily a world of chance and appearance. Only Socrates' alliance with Laches, based in part on Socrates' insight into the real courage of Laches, transcends, and potentially affects, the appearances that dominate political life. By pursuing such an alliance, then, Socrates seems to intimate that not all the political battles that count are of the sort in which Nicias and Laches ordinarily partake; there are also the battles that take place between men who prize *real* virtue, such as Socrates and his ally Laches, and men who prize the *appearance* of virtue, such as Nicias. Consequently, Socrates does not simply reveal to the men and boys present Laches' superiority to

Nicias; rather, he conscripts the courageous Laches for the battle of real virtue against feigned wisdom.

The question remains: does the dialogue's title offer instruction on how courage can be taught? The first part of such a question, "what courage is", is the explicit subject of the second half of the dialogue, yet the failure to achieve a comprehensive definition seems to rule out an answer concerning education in courage. Nevertheless, just as the dialogue offers instruction on what courage is (and is not), without resolving the totality of questions attendant upon such a definition, it also offers instruction on the education of courage. We may begin by recalling the selection of courage as the virtue to be examined in the attempt to know what virtue is. Although the role of courage in visible deeds and in the noble, and thus in acquiring fame, surely plays a part in the selection, the dialogue reveals that *courage in speech*—both in the sense of speaking courageously in political life, and in the sense of courageously pursuing the truth—is an essential part of education in virtue. As noted previously, Laches, not Nicias, is able to grasp the gravity of Socratic speech, a seriousness that is availed to Laches because of his courage. Those lacking courage, and thus those lacking the courage to endure self-reflection, or to fight the pleasures and desires that lead one away from education, cowardly turn from the care of their own souls. This role of courage in education presents a paradox: can courage itself be taught, if courage is a necessary prerequisite for genuine education? The dialogue as a whole intimates that courage can be taught, and it is a unifying thread running throughout the seemingly disparate parts of the *Laches*. In the first half of

the dialogue, Laches does not possess the type of courage proven exclusively in the realm of *logos*. In fact, his principle of Doric harmony rules out the existence of such courage. For this reason, Laches' irritation at his own inability to give an account of courage is a crucial moment of the *Laches*. Laches does more than recognize that his account of courage fails; unlike Nicias, Laches is also passionately moved to overcome this failing, to gain the victory in the realm of speeches without deeds. Whatever his failings in actually carrying out his passionate interest—and they are considerable—Laches' excited spirit provides the impetus for acquiring an account of his courage, a pursuit of truth he did not earlier posses, and a pursuit of truth that itself requires courage. In the course of the dialogue, then, Laches has *learned* to be courageous in a realm previously inaccessible to him, and is therefore *more* courageous than at the dialogue's beginning.

All this is to say that the significance of Laches points us to the significance of Socrates. Socrates' proven courage initially commands Laches' respect; however, it is the *activity* of Socratic questioning that teaches Laches courage, an education that brings with it a new portrait of Socrates. In other words, Laches' education, grounded upon Laches' willingness to assess honestly the various inclinations of his soul, is also reliant upon Socrates for its realization. Socrates does not simply reveal to Laches an aspect of courage Laches has hitherto unseen, but inculcates Laches' own interest in the question, a process brought to fruition through Socrates' skill at leading through questioning. Only then does Laches realize that *his own* opinions regarding virtue are in contradiction. Understanding the nature of Socratic questioning is thus paramount in understanding the problem of education in virtue.

We may recall that this question brings us to the beginning of our analysis, as understanding Socratic questioning is, for the reader, commensurate with the task of understanding the Platonic dialogue. Although the *Laches* plays an admittedly minor role in this task, it does have much to teach. For the Platonic dialogue, if read seriously, questions the reader in the same manner in which Socrates questions Laches and Nicias. Plato does not expound a theory of courage, or a theory on the education of courage; rather, the reader must bring himself to bear on the questions posed by the dialogue, the very process of which is essential to our understanding such questions. Without an honest and courageous reading of the whole of a Platonic dialogue, or without an honest and courageous reading of the whole of human reality, one is left in the same realm as Nicias—divorced from virtue and an education in virtue, with one's fortunes in the hands of the opinion leaders of the polity.

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